

The Tablecloth – Krakow, Poland

Local Personality – Rabbi Moshe Isserles

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R' Yisrael owned a textile shop in the center of the Jewish quarter of the small Kazimierz district. He managed his shop with the same level of devotion as his prayers. He was the first in the quarter to open shop in the morning, and the last shop in which a candle burned at night. He was careful about cleanliness and order, warmly welcomed every person, and was a fair boss to his employees. He never missed a day of work. Yet, every single day, a few minutes before noon, he would close his books, exit the store, and lock the door behind him.

R' Yisrael put on his hat, buried his head in his coat, and without turning or delaying for even a short exchange of words, walked briskly down the city streets until he reached the *Beit Midrash* (study hall). He entered, hung up his coat, took off his hat, sat down in his regular seat, and opened a volume of the Talmud whose pages were worn due to excessive use. He did the same thing day in, day out, for his entire life.

One day, God and Satan ran into each other. After their regular exchange, Satan started to boast about his recent achievements, as usual. He shared stories of evil and corruption with glee, describing the envy and violence spreading on earth. "Soon," he announced misty-eyed, "the entire world will be mine."

God looked back at him with a small grin and hugged his shoulders in pity. "My dear brother," he said quietly, "I've just returned from Kazimierz, next to Krakow. In the city square, there is a small textile shop whose owner is an honest man of pure heart. You will never succeed in corrupting him, even if you try with all of your might."

Lightning flashed in Satan's eyes and sparks flew out of his horns. "There is no person I cannot corrupt!" he cried out furiously. "Humans are evil from birth! You will see!" and he disappeared in a storm, leaving scorch marks in the spot where he had stood.

It was 11:30 a.m. the next day when Satan entered R' Yisrael's shop, dressed as a high noble in expensive clothing, surrounded by a group of servants. "Hello and welcome," R' Yisrael greeted him warmly. "I have come to buy fabric! A lot of fabric!" Satan announced. "With pleasure," replied R' Yisrael, "But we have just thirty minutes, because at 12:00, I will have to close the shop." He started spreading out his wares before Satan, who examined each and every roll carefully. It was 11:45 when Satan asked to see what else was in the back warehouse, and at 11:55, he was still standing and deliberating between the blue and the azure. When R' Yisrael tried to put the rolls of fabric aside and leave on his way, Satan bellowed, "This is the opportunity of a lifetime! With the money that I pay you, you will be able to close your store and take a vacation for the rest of your life. What could be more important than a sum of money as big as this?" But R' Yisrael could not be budged, and at 12:00 precisely, he escorted Satan, who had thin curls of smoke emanating from his ears, out of the shop, locked the door, and walked toward the *Beit Midrash* as usual.

From his seat in heaven, God watched the events with interest. He smiled to himself with satisfaction and at that moment decided that as a token of thanks to R' Yisrael, he would give him a righteous son who would be a great scholar and a leader, famous in all Jewish communities. That night, R' Yisrael's wife became pregnant, and nine months later, the Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, was born.

It's been years since R' Yisrael's shop stood on Szeroka Square in the center of Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter of Krakow. Today, the only shops here are a bookstore, selling spiritual and tourist guidebooks about Krakow and about Judaism, and a small souvenir stall at the entrance of the Rema Synagogue. A few restaurants bearing signs that read "Kosher" are open on weeknights, serving meaningless, warped versions of classic Polish dishes, lacking butter and cream. Around the square, there are four synagogues just 100 meters from each other, testimony of the rich Jewish life that once existed here. I don't think there is another place in the world where one can find such a tight cluster of synagogues, not even in the Jewish State.

On Friday afternoon, Szeroka Square is very quiet. There is no commotion of preparations for the Sabbath, no Jews walking back and forth loaded with shopping bags, and none of the excitement reserved for sanctity that awaits you just around the corner. A few tourists, engrossed in soft-covered travel guides, stand in the corners of the square, and one tour guide walks between the desolate synagogues with his group.

Although Warsaw has been the capital of Poland for the last four hundred years, during the six hundred years that preceded them, the capital was Krakow. The Rema's Krakow was a multicultural city where culture, arts, architecture, scientific research, and commerce flourished. It was the capital city of one of the largest, wealthiest, and strongest countries in Europe. It is no wonder that the sixteenth century was the first golden age in the history of Polish Jewry, whilst the second took place from the middle of the nineteenth century until World War Two. These were periods of prosperity, when Jews were allowed to develop extensive autonomy, which included rich spiritual, cultural, and social life. However, while the Jewish story in Warsaw disappeared among the modern skyscrapers and the few relics that remain from the bombed-out city after the war, in Krakow, the Jewish story of the golden periods peeks out from every corner.

In 1495, about thirty years before the birth of the Rema, Jews were expelled from Krakow and forced to live in nearby Kazimierz. This was due to the jealousy and resentment of the city's merchants and the scholars of the Jagiellonian University. To this day, the university stands in a region that was previously Jewish. Most of the stores surrounding the central square of the old city today, the Sukienice, were owned by Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the bridge featured in photographs of Jewish families loaded with packages on their way to the ghetto, still stretches across the Vistula River. In Kazimierz, the center of Jewish life since the sixteenth century, there are 500-year-old synagogues alongside marketplaces that rested on the Sabbath. Jewish schools where Zionism was taught are located adjacent to the tombs of authorities of Jewish law who influenced the entire Jewish world. In a few places, the remains of Hebrew inscriptions above empty Beit

Midrash buildings are still visible, as are the rusty Yiddish street signs that tell the story of this vanished world.

Not much remains of the glorious age of the sixteenth century: a few books and manuscripts, empty synagogues, a small cemetery, and quite a few legends that shroud the visit to Krakow with a light aura of mystery and longing. These legends come in different shades and sizes, but always captivate the heart, and as opposed to the fairy tales on which we grew up, the legends of Krakow tell of people and places that really existed. Sometimes, they tell the story of an ancient tombstone, smooth from being caressed by countless hands over the centuries. Sometimes, they are modern stories based on events that really happened, such as the film *Schindler's List*, which was filmed in the alleyways of Kazimierz.

Like any product in high demand, these legends aren't always authentic, and you need to examine them carefully before opening your heart to them. Not far from Szeroka Square, there is a small second-hand market on Sundays. The Judaica items offered for sale on wooden tables covered with worn carpets coax the Jewish heart and whisper their own legends. Once, I paid an exorbitant sum for a charming miniature "travel Hanukiya." I thought that I was redeeming a small Jewish story from the abyss of oblivion. How great was my disappointment when I discovered later on, that I had fallen into the trap of a successful forgery. My Hanukiya turned out to be a tale that never was.

In the past, people told legends around the bonfire, at the fair, or around the family table. Today, we are told legends in color and sound on the big screen and on television. Films and TV series offer us a window to a wondrous world, as did legends, ballads, and folk tales in the past. Heroes of legends are blessed with an abundance of humanity – so that we can identify with them, and superhuman qualities – in order to inspire us. They are quicker, smarter, better, or more deadly than we can ever be. They withstand challenges that we can only dream of succeeding, and deal with questions that we thankfully don't have to face. A successful legend enables us to play the heroes of the story, to get emotional, and then resume our regular lives with a new perspective.

It is no wonder, then, that the legends about Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the son of R' Yisrael, owner of the fabric store, are among the most well-known legends of Krakow. The Rema was the superhero of Krakow Jewry throughout the generations. He was wealthy, wise, original, and successful. He led the local community, but was renowned by Jewish communities worldwide. He introduced new ideas, aroused polemics, stood by his opinions, and was blessed with a sensitive heart. The Rema was part of the first golden age of Polish Jewry – and was the most prominent Jewish leader in Poland in the sixteenth century. One legend notes that he lived for 33 years, passed away on the 33rd day of the Omer (Lag BaOmer), and wrote 33 books. While most of the facts known about the Rema do not support this legend, for hundreds of years, Jews from all over Poland have been coming to Krakow on Lag BaOmer to pray and hold festive meals at his grave. They meet at the small cemetery hidden behind the synagogue that bears his name. The gravesite is

concealed by a huge tree, and legend has it that the tree shielded him throughout the generations, to the extent that even the Nazis didn't dare to touch his grave.

One legend attributes the Rema's heightened moral qualities to a poor water carrier. Because of an act of charity that the water carrier performed, he merited to be returned to this world as an emissary from heaven. His task was to tell the Rema that he should ask every Jew to contribute charity, not just the wealthy members of the city, because charity is an important commandment that earns great rewards in the World to Come. According to the legend, after he did so, the Rema was blessed with long life.

However, the many legends surrounding the life of the Rema are nothing compared with his true-life story. If you are inclined to learn about just one Jewish leader from Poland – the Rema should be the one. The decisions that he rendered established ethical standards that were relevant not only to Jews but to every human being to this day. Two stories that almost became legends – but really happened – illuminate his extraordinary character.

The first story is about a young woman whose father lost everything he had, and then passed away together with her mother, leaving her alone in the world. Before his death, her father arranged her marriage to a worthy man, but when the time came for the wedding, there was no one to provide her with a dowry. The date set for the wedding was a Friday, and on that morning, the young woman decided that she would not give up on her wedding plans, out of a strong sense of faith that God would provide a solution for her. She immersed herself in a ritual bath and kind women helped her with the wedding dress, but there was still no one to provide her with a dowry. The groom refused to proceed with the marriage. Despite the cries from the people of the city begging him not to embarrass his future wife, the groom would not budge from his decision. The argument continued for hours and was settled at long last – alas – only after the Sabbath had started. The Rema, who was called to officiate at the wedding ceremony, faced a difficult decision: to make a lonely young woman happy on her big day, or to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath. Loyal to his practical, sensitive approach, the Rema permitted conducting the ceremony on the Sabbath, in order not to shame the bride. This decision was met with harsh criticism. The people in the city were so worried that such a precedent might repeat itself, that from that day onward, the custom in the city was not to hold weddings on a Friday. It took a great deal of courage, as well as modesty and practical wisdom, for the Rema to reach this decision. Thus, the Rema marked himself as a cultural superhero, enabling each of us to follow our hearts on issues related to dealings between a person and another.

The second story is nothing less than amazing. Traditional Judaism is a religion of practical commandments that encompass all areas of life. Since the reality of life changes from generation to generation, a collection of Halachic (Jewish law) compositions was compiled over the years to summarize, each in its own turn, all of the proper practices of Jewish life during the relevant period. The last work in this series was written about 200 years before the Rema was born. Thus, the Rema decided to dedicate his life to writing a work that would constitute an updated guide for all of the Jews of his generation. Without Google

to help him, he immersed himself in the holy books. He used his phenomenal memory to analyze the massive quantities of information scattered across hundreds of books, and rendered decisions between the different opinions appearing in the books that preceded him. For years, he worked day and night writing this magnum opus, and then, right before the book was finished – his entire world collapsed. He received a copy of a book called *The Beit Yosef*, written by Rabbi Yosef Karo of Tzefat, in the land of Israel. To his dismay, it turned out that Rabbi Yosef Karo had also worked on an identical book and published it just a few months before his own work was ready. The Rema, utterly devastated, shut himself in his study and didn't come out for days on end. Yet, after thoroughly reading Rabbi Yosef Karo's work, he reached the conclusion that his interpretations of Jewish law followed the Sephardic customs, while the Rema's book followed the Ashkenazi customs. Therefore, he dedicated the next few years to pinpointing the differences between the two methods of rendering Jewish law. The years went by and when he was finally ready to publish his revised book, he received, again to his astonishment, a copy of the abridged version of Rabbi Yosef Karo's book, which was entitled the *Shulchan Arukh*. Once again, the Rema faced a difficult decision: should he publish his life's work as a separate book under his own name, which would inevitably cause a schism in Judaism between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews?

He stepped down. Instead of publishing his life's work under his own name, the Rema decided to add his notes to the *Shulchan Arukh*, reflecting his rendering of Jewish law in the spirit of the customs of Ashkenaz. He called these additions the "Mapa," meaning – the tablecloth, which he spread on top of the "*Shulchan Arukh*," which means "a set table." These notes still appear in every printed version of the *Shulchan Arukh* throughout the entire Jewish world. In this way, the Rema preserved the unity of the nation, at the cost of his own renown and personal glory. Every time I tell this story, I am moved to tears. It is difficult to imagine how the Jewish world would look today if the Rema had not made the brave and humble decision that he made. What immense strength of character must a person have to give up their entire life's work on behalf of future generations – people whom he would never even meet. Would I have made the same decision? Would you?

Krakow, the legendary capital of Poland, gives the visitor a different perspective on Jewish life. At the basis of the Jewish story of Krakow, there are no impressive numbers, no technological achievements, or a national awakening. The Jewish heart is the driving force behind the tale of Krakow, and if you just listen to it carefully – it will whisper to you a different type of Jewish heroism tales.