THE JEWS OF UKRAINE
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
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I started thinking about this sermon on Monday. Monday seems like a 30 years ago, before the restart of the Cold War, which isn't so cold right now)

I thought on Monday that I would talk about the Jews of Ukraine, past, present, and future. In particular I planned to frame my talk around President Zelensky, but to be honest, I wasn't sure he'd be alive by *shabbes* when I planned to deliver it. I thank G-d that he is, that he is the courageous leader, defending his country, uniting democratic nations and that he does so unapologetically and proudly as a Jew.

There is something Maccabean in his resolve, *chutzpadik* and at the same time tremendously sobering.

Let me say this plainly and at the start: This conflict is not about the Jewish people, this isn't about antisemitism. Though it is hard for many Jews, especially those that know a bit about the history of violence toward Jews in that region to not see it through an antisemitic frame.

Putin, (*yamach Sh'mo*, may his name be blotted out) framed it that way, in a perversion of anti-Jewish racism when he justified his invasion on the grounds of the need to pursue a de-Nazification of Ukraine, with its Jewish president and Jewish Prime Minister it's just absurd.

Former president of Russia, Medvedev was less nuanced. He referred to Zelensky as a man with, "certain ethnic roots;" and then suggested that he concealed his Jewish identity to serve the interests of the Ukraine nationalists. Medvedev said that Zelensky's "betrayal of Russia" and betrayal was an exact quote, made him like the Sonner commando. The Sonner commandos were the Jews who were forced to clean the ashes of the bodies of Jews who were killed in the camps.

When you use that kind of rhetoric about someone, I don't have to tell you that what you are doing is appealing to deeply ingrained antisemitic stereotypes in Russia, and in Ukraine to undermine the credibility of the president who is, as he has said himself, the number one target of the Russian troops and to evoke deep seated hatred for Jews that might turn Ukrainians against their elected leaders, a perceived cabal of Jewish masters, right out of that Russian classic, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion".

I bring this up because if we don't understand why Putin and Medvedev are in part justifying this invasion by using antisemitic tropes then we don't understand the long history that Ukraine has with the Jewish people and understanding that is crucial to understanding the situation today.

Now I want to be very clear before I continue this war is about Ukraine and about Russia; it is not about the Jews. But we must be very careful not to only see this war through a Jewish lens,

and at the same time as Jews we must acknowledge that our people have a deep historical connection to that place; a place that many, my family included can trace our roots too, whether in our distant past or our more recent past.

My great grandfather Pincus was from Odesa. Was it Russia? Ukraine? Poland? We are not sure. It's the fifth question at many a family seder, "Why do we know the city Papa was from but not the country? Because the borders kept changing." This war is about changing them again.

There is that old Jewish line about looking out the window in your shtetl to see which flag was in the village square, then you knew what country you were in, at least till they changed the flag again. As a Jew however, living in the Ukraine, no matter whose flag it was, it wasn't yours. Historically, Ukraine has not been a safe place to be a Jew.

I don't only mean in the 20th century. But I mean in the history of the Jews of Ukraine, going back more than 400 years.

In the 16th and 17th century Jews began to move into what was then the Polish Lithuanian, Commonwealth – remember you had to look out your window, the flags kept changing.

The numbers increased and for Jews living in the late Middle Ages they were doing pretty well. Then in 1648, Bogdan Khmelnitsky, who was a military hero, helped foment a revolt and war began. And in 1648 and 1649, there were what is known in Jewish history as *Gzeyrot Takh Vetat* "The Evil Decrees of 1648 and 1649". In that time, thousands upon thousands upon thousands, tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered. A third of the entire population of the area was killed.

I'm going to read you the testimony of just one. Although there are so many Ahaton Smuel Kedenover who later on became the Rabbi of Krackow in Poland was a scholar and a writer and a teacher. This is what he wrote in 1659.

"I lay alone with a broken leg, lame and crippled when God destroyed the Polish and Lithuanian communities, everything I valued was taken from me, my wealth and possessions, my family, my two little girls murdered as martyrs and all the holy books that I had written, I thought I would be cut off from the land of the living for I was defiled and filthy rolling in the blood of the martyrs on the street who had given up their souls to die. I was starving. And so thirsty that my tongue stuck to my pallet, the enemy brought me to be killed many times. And I stretched out my neck like a lamb of the slaughter, but God in his great mercy has kept me alive until this day in the land of the survivors."

That was written a decade later, what happened to the people who survived? Most of them, most of them became refugees and a large percentage were sold into slavery.

The Muslim Tartars came, took the Jews and sold them as slaves throughout the middle east, especially in Istanbul, which was the capital of the slave trade at the time. Imagine Ukrainian Jews taken by Tartars to Istanbul to be sold as slaves.

What happened as a result was that the entire Jewish world started to raise money for *Pidyon S'vuim*, the redeeming of the captives. We have stories of people who wrote books so that they could make money so that they could redeem their children and their spouse who had been sold into slavery.

This period was later called *Horban Ukraine*. The term *Horban* before this time was used for only one other event in Jewish history. The destruction of the temple, *Horban HaBayit*. Which meant that this catastrophe, which was the greatest catastrophe in European history until the Shoah was thought of as equivalent to the destruction of the temple.[1]

At the beginning of the 20th century, before the Holocaust between 1918 and 1921, there were over a thousand anti-Jewish riots and military actions commonly referred to as pogroms throughout that area that is now called Ukraine. It was those pogroms that convinced my Great Grandfather Pinchas and probably many of your own great grandparents to leave and never look back.

And we know what happened to those that didn't leave.

Of that I will only say this, once World War II started different nations had different levels of collaboration with the Nazis; without giving too many details, I will only say that Ukraine was maybe the most brutal to the Jews in its midst.

I tell you all of this in part, because while this war is not about the Jews or antisemitism, the truth is that the story of Ukraine is in part a Jewish story. The suffering and destruction in that region has touched many different people and many different ethnic groups for hundreds of years; but it has touched our people, the Jewish people every single time, disproportionately so over those 400+ years

During and particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union many Jews left Ukraine. I remember as a teen standing outside the Soviet Consulate on Green Street in San Francisco and chanting with my BBYO Chapter, "One-two-three-four, Open-up-the-iron-door, Five-six-seven-eight, let-our-people-emigrate".

This week I called every family we could identify in our shul who immigrated from Ukraine, only one still had family there, the Krakovskys and we received word Thursday night that thank G-d their family, are safe now, after a harrowing journey to cross the border into Moldova.

But still some stayed, a lot, 100k-200k by some estimations – making Ukraine one of the largest Jewish communities in the world today; and now once again those Jews and the 39,800,000 other citizens of Ukraine are once again in grave danger.

And so I want to say three things:

[1] Credit to a sermon by Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple Los Angeles 2/26/22 from which I learned this bit of Jewish history, beginning with the "The Evil Decrees of 1648-49" till this footnote. I include it here *B'shem Amro*, in the name of the one who first said it.

(1) Its ok to have "complicated feelings about Ukraine because of its history of antisemitisms. This was painfully highlighted on Tuesday when a Russian strike hit the area of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, where tens of thousands of Jews were killed during the Nazi occupation of Kyiv, Ukraine's capital.

AND (which on my text here is bolded and underlined and in capital letters)

AND right now, it doesn't matter because Russia is an aggressor that is killing innocent men, women and children. We can acknowledge our complicated feelings about what happened in the past, but right now we have to do what is right.

(2) Our history has taught us time and time again that often out of calamity and catastrophe, our greatest moral accomplishments are often achieved. That's true of the free world and it is particularly true of Jewish history. There is no certainty in this, and the suffering can be long and unimaginably horrific; redemption does not always come in our lifetime or even in a generation; but thus far, for more than 3500 years as a Jewish people and through the steady march of liberty and democracy, often in the hands of good people rising in the face a tyranny – redemption has come. This conflict is uniting the free world. I have seen the destruction and rancour we are capable of when we are divided and distrustful; I am ready to see once again what good people united in a righteous and noble cause will be able to achieve.

(3) Pidyon S'vuim, Redeem the Captives! We must do everything within our power and resources to save those who are in grave danger, and here in this room at this moment I speak specifically of the those among the 200,000 Jews of Ukraine, particularly the aged, the vulnerable and the children that are running for their very lives.

This coming week JIAS (the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society) and Jewish Federation have convened a meeting to discuss how many Jewish refugees the Vancouver Jewish community can take. Where Canada once said, "none is too many". I intend to tell them that we will take, "every last one" and I do this with full confidence that this congregation and every congregation in this city will back that up with the same sense of *schlichut*, sacred purpose that our parents, grandparents, and the Jews of 1649 dedicated to redeeming our ancestors.

As we will read next week on Purim in the Book of Esther, another Jewish hero who embraced her Jewishness at a moment of grave peril for her people.

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת׃

"Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family."
(Esther 4:14)

Maybe it was for a moment like this that we were created.