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THE PLAGUE WEDDING

In the months following the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic there has been renewed attention given to what had previously been an obscure and long-forgotten Jewish ceremony. On March 18, 2020, a wedding took place at the Ponevezh cemetery in the city of Bnei Brak in Israel. It was reported in the Israeli press, and drone footage documented a *huppa* erected next to the wall of the cemetery, with a few dozen onlookers carefully weaving their way among the fresh graves. The story travelled widely, and the ceremony has since been reported in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and on various blogs and websites.¹ This unexpected attention to a little-known and often controversial Jewish response to pandemics raises many questions. What were its origins, how widespread was it, and what might be the halakhic and philosophical implications of this striking, and admittedly bizarre, ceremony? This paper, long in preparation before the COVID pandemic, is an attempt at some answers.

Most, but not all of these weddings took place in a cemetery. Such a wedding acquired an unforgettable moniker: It was known in Yiddish as a *shvartse khasene*, a “black wedding,” and is sometimes referred to as a

¹ Natan Meir, “The Cholera Wedding and Its Meaning for Our Time,” *The Los Angeles Review of Books* (April 2, 2020) (available at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/cholera-wedding-meaning-time>), and on the Israeli websites *Kikar Shabbat* (www.kikar.co.il/abroad/351824.html) and *Ynet* (www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5697125,00.html). A similar ceremony that had taken place during the great influenza pandemic of 1918 was reported in Steven Bell, “When a Cemetery Wedding Was Used to End the Spanish Flu,” *The New York Times* (June 13, 2020), see more on this below. For an example of discussion of the ceremony outside of the Jewish community see, e.g., Susannah Heschel, “A Wedding in a Cemetery: Judaism, Terror, and Pandemic,” *Social Science Research Council* (<https://tif.ssrc.org/2020/06/18/a-wedding-in-a-cemetery>).

“cholera wedding” or a “plague wedding.”² Whatever it was called, it was, until recently, a little-known and poorly studied Jewish response to famines and plagues.³ We will trace the reach of the plague wedding from Eastern Europe to Palestine and westwards to the New World, examine the various types of ceremony (for there was more than one) and the reactions of enlightened Jews of the *Haskala* who watched in pain as their brethren performed what appeared to their enlightened eyes to be a most base and foolish superstitious act. We will examine contemporary reports of the plague wedding in Yiddish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, and English newspapers. All this will enable us to place the recent plague wedding into its historical context and allow us to better understand this ceremony of utter desperation, one that today seems so foreign as to have belonged to something other than Jewish tradition.

The Cemetery Wedding in Jerusalem

In 1868 Moshe Nussbaum (1840-1880) published a memoir of his time visiting the old *Yishuv* in Jerusalem. He mentioned in some detail the Hebrew year 5626 (1866) which had been especially harsh for the community of impoverished Jews. The crops had been devastated by a vast

² In his fascinating recently published book, Natan Meir titles a chapter “The Cholera Wedding,” although he acknowledged that they occurred in response to other diseases. See Natan Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800-1939* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 89–116. Most of the Yiddish sources I consulted refer to the ceremony as “the wedding in the cemetery” (*di klupe oyfn beys-oylem*). However Feiga Teitel refers to the ceremony as a “*shvartse khasene*” in her Yiddish memoir, see Feiga Teitel, “A Black Wedding in Opt” (Yiddish) in *Opt: The Memorial Book of a Jewish Town and People Who Once Lived, and Have Perished*, 106–107. In his English memoir of life in the same town, Meyer Kirshenblatt wrote that “a black wedding, a *shvartse khasne* would be held in the cemetery at a designated time”; see Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust* (University of California Press, 2007), 14. I will be using the term *plague wedding* although *cemetery wedding* is also a term frequently used in the original Yiddish sources.

³ This paper has relied in part on the important prior work by Zvi Friedhaber, “‘Plague Marriages’ as Reflected in Hebrew Literature and the Hebrew Press” (Hebrew), *Dappim: Research in Literature* 7 (1990), 305–316. While most of my primary sources were uncovered independently of Friedhaber, I acknowledge an important debt to his work. Another review of the topic can be found in Hanna Wegrzynek, “Shvartze Khasene,” in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe*, ed. Glynn Dynner (Wayne State University Press, 2011), 55–68. Finally, I should note Natan Meir’s lengthy chapter “The Cholera Wedding,” in which I consulted long after the majority of the essay had been written; Natan Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 89–116.

swarm of locusts that had arrived from Egypt in the Spring of 1865. They destroyed the local crops and then moved north and ravaged Tiberias and Safed. This was accompanied with what Nussbaum described as an infectious disease that arose “from the poison that the locusts inject into the produce, and from their smell.” In just two weeks, 150 people from the small population of Jerusalem had died.

Nussbaum recorded the response of the rabbinate in Safed to the twin plagues. “The leaders of that holy city took orphaned boys and girls and married them off to one another. The weddings were in the [Safed] cemetery between the graves of our teacher the Arizal, and the Beit Yosef z”l. For this was a tradition that they had, and thanks to God who removed this deathly outbreak from among them.”⁴ A cemetery wedding in response to the same plague took place in Jerusalem and was recorded by Eliyahu Porush: “In 5626 (1866) there was an extremely severe cholera epidemic in Jerusalem. As a good omen to stop the epidemic a wedding was held in the cemetery on Mount of Olives. The wedding was that of Rav Yosef Lutziner (Danker) and was attended by many and was a very joyous occasion.”⁵

Among the fresh graves in the old cemeteries of Safed and Jerusalem, the Jews performed a remarkable life-affirming ritual; they set up traditional wedding canopies and married several couples. The accounts give no more details of this episode, leaving the modern reader to puzzle over what precisely had happened all those years ago. The ceremony did not, however, originate in the Land of Israel, but was imported from the shtetls of Eastern Europe.

Accounts from Community Memorial Books

Among the accounts of the plague wedding are several works published in the 1950s and 1960s that describe the daily life in Jewish towns and villages before the Holocaust. At least nineteen of these “Yizkor Books” record the occurrence of a plague wedding in the towns or villages that they commemorate.⁶ Although the majority of the descriptions come

⁴ Moshe Nussbaum, *Sefer Shaarei Yerushalayim* (Warsaw, 1868), 39b. The book was published in at least twelve editions between 1866 and 1880.

⁵ Eliyahu Porush, *Early Memories (Zikbronot Rishonim)* (Solomon Press, 1963), 22.

⁶ The database of Yizkor Books at The New York Public Library contains almost 850 items, though some are multiple volumes of the same village or town (see <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/yizkor-book-collection>). The nineteen Yizkor Books that record the occurrence of a plague wedding are not all currently found in that database. I have cataloged them as an appendix to this article, see there for full bibliographical data on each entry cited in the footnotes.

from areas within a 300 mile radius of Warsaw, the ceremony is described as far east as Sumy Oblast in what is now northeastern Ukraine, on the Russian border, and as far south as Edinet (Yedints) in present-day northern Moldova. It is valuable to review a few descriptions from these books, for they provide details of the particular events that led to the weddings, as well as an insight into how they were actually coordinated and celebrated. For example, in Opatow (Apt) in south-central Poland, there was a cholera epidemic in 1892.

Because there was a customary good omen known at that time the rabbis of the city decided to arrange a wedding in the cemetery, known as “a *shvartse khasene*.” To this end they found a pair of upstanding orphans who were being supported by communal charity. After the match was finalized, it was announced in all of the synagogues that a wedding was to be prepared. On the day of the wedding everyone in the town—God-fearing and secular alike—arrived at the cemetery. The bridal canopy was erected next to the old shrine of a well-known righteous man. The women held torches in their hands, and the bride was brought in on a fancy chair.⁷

A similar ceremony occurred in the town of Plonsk.

Every day in the study halls you could hear the cries of psalms and prayers next to the Holy Ark, as people tried to avert the terrible decree. They appeared not to rely on the physicians alone, and they tried to rescue the precious lives through prayer.

The situation continued for a number of months and when these prayers also failed to help, the elders of the city decided to try a more tested and reliable intervention. That is, they performed a marriage in the cemetery. To this end they chose a special pair: the groom was Michel the Lame, who spent all his time sorting through piles of rags next to Reb Zvi Hirsch Kalman Zabrishdelo. The bride was Tamar, from a distinguished family in the area. Her dowry was epilepsy. Both were very old.

The wedding took place at noon in the middle of the cemetery. Nearly everyone who was left alive and was not in quarantine joined. The wedding feast was fancy and took place in the wood storage of Kasman and Zilberfening next to the study hall of Rabbi Yitzhak Cohen. They built tables and stools from the wood that was stored there to be sold.

⁷ Feiga Teitel, “A Black Wedding in Opt” (Yiddish) in *Opt: The Memorial Book of a Jewish Town and People Who Once Lived, and Have Perished*, 106–107.

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I am not sure if the marriage of Michel did anything to slow the outbreak. I do recall that autumn brought to an end the hot summer and the outbreak slowed in stages. The plague claimed hundreds of Jewish victims in our city.⁸

In the town of Gorlice (southeastern Poland) there was a plague wedding during the typhus epidemic of 1896:

As a good omen to stop it a wedding of two cripples was performed in the cemetery. In our city there was a certain cripple by the name of Lazerke Wassertrager who carried water in pails from the well in Debroziske to people's homes.

Everyone made a great effort to marry him off to another cripple, and the community would cover the expenses. All the Jewish inhabitants joined in the rejoicing. At the head of a parade were people dressed as Cossacks on horseback, who accompanied the couple to the cemetery and to the canopy that was there. Afterwards the parade returned for a large public feast in honor of the couple and their guests given by the late Reb Yaakov Lang, in two large basement rooms, in the home of the late Reb Shmuel Alexandrovich.⁹

Another Memorial Book, this one from the village of Olyka, records a plague wedding following another typhus outbreak, spread by unburied human and animal corpses from the battlefields of the First World War.

It was in the days of World War I. The battlefield between Czarist Russia and the Kaiser's Germany was not too far away—just a few kilometers from our town. During nine months of killing on both sides, human and animal corpses decomposed in the fields, and fleas that swarmed into the trenches of soldiers left their mark over time. The typhus plague, which was the fate of many, broke out in Olyka as well. It affected most of the families and took down many a victim. There was no home without a fatality, and the doctors were unable to save people given the poor hygienic conditions, and the lack of hospitals and possibilities of isolation.

At the end of the destruction, community leaders met with the Rebbe, R. Alter Yosef David... to discuss how to appease God to stop the Angel of Death. [R. Alter] paused, thought it over, and finally decided that since the commandment of marrying off a bride is unparalleled, nothing

⁸ *Sefer Plonsk veba-Seviva*, 136. The date of the wedding is not provided.

⁹ M.Y. Bar-On, ed., *Sefer Gorlice* (Yiddish), 96.

would be better than to marry off the virgin Idis, an orphan of marriageable age who was alone in the world. The groom, David, was also alone in the world, without anyone to support him (he acquired the nickname the “City Groom,” which stayed with him all his life), and it was hoped that merciful God would save the community from any further suffering.

Everyone in town contributed generously as an atonement for their sins to the dowry of the couple, enabling them to have sufficient resources to start their lives together. The wedding was held according to Jewish law with the rabbi, a band, vodka, cake and a meal of delicacies. The community leaders headed by the sons of the Rebbe served as surrogate parents. The community flooded the house until there was no more room.

The wedding ceremony was held in the cemetery. This was a tradition used in order to link the living and the dead, and perhaps to appease the victims of the plague who died before their time, so that they would beseech God for mercy on us. In addition to this, the very act of the marriage and the seven days of celebration carried power and influence in the upper worlds, and a sort of oath lest Heaven did not do its part (inasmuch as God himself is a matchmaker).

Therefore, God heard the pleas and prayers of the holy flock of Olyka, his anger was assuaged, and he sent snow and bitter cold. The plague ended.¹⁰

The town of Siedlce (Shedlitz) in eastern Poland held three weddings to stave off natural disasters. In 1917, during an outbreak of typhus, a plague wedding was held in which the groom was an elderly man “with a large crooked head.” A second wedding was held a number of years later in response to severe economic hardship, but it is the third wedding, held in 1925, that is of special interest, because the text of the invitation to the wedding has survived.¹¹ It took place in response to a series of harsh economic measures imposed by the Prime Minister Władysław Grabski.¹² The groom was named Ahrki and the bride was Naomi (Nomikl), and both were of short-stature. The invitation contained Hebrew in one

¹⁰ *Pinkas ha-Kehilla Olikka: Sefer Yizkor*, 115.

¹¹ The text of the invitation is from Yitzhak Caspi, “Three Weddings in Shedlitz,” *Reshumot 2* (1946), 102. I am very grateful to Dan Rabinowitz for bringing this to my attention.

¹² Grabski served as Poland’s Minister of Finance on three occasions, and twice as Prime Minister, ending his political career in November 1925.

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column, Yiddish in another, and an acrostic made up of the names of the bride and groom in the middle.

- (ח) The Father of all orphans calls to you to come and join in rejoicing
- (ה) The elderly orphaned and their wedding
- (ג) Great in years but small in height, listen and help them
- (פ) Take your generous hearts and give them gifts
- (י) Open your arms to this couple, and I will repay your efforts
- (ז) Surely give to the elderly groom and bride
- (ש) Stir yourselves, inhabitants of our city, to make them happy
- (ב) Come from the streets and markets let us join together to see them
- (ו) These, orphaned from their fathers and mothers, may they build an everlasting home
- (ק) Come now, get up together and stand on Agradava Street
- (ל) To the House of the Elderly and He who helps the Orphans, see how, at an auspicious moment
The elderly Ahrki (may he live long) will take the elderly and short bride,
the virgin Naomi, may she live...

We conclude this section with perhaps the most unusual of the Memorial Book witnesses, this one from the Memorial Book of Zambrów by Meir Zokrovitch.¹³ It is extraordinary because it records not only a plague wedding in response to typhus, but includes the other steps that were taken before the decision was made to proceed with the wedding, and sheds light on other Jewish folk practices of the time.

In the summer of 1893, wrote Zokrovitch, the epidemic caused “Jews and Gentiles to hurry to their places of worship where each person would call on his own God to show mercy and end His anger.” The local windmill was requisitioned to serve as a field hospital, and Jewish rescue teams, at no small danger to themselves, served to treat and evacuate the sick. (“It should be noted that almost none of the rescue team became sick, even though they dealt with many sick people each day. It was a miracle.”) The period of *shiva* was suspended in order to prevent many people from congregating in one place, as were synagogue services. On Yom Kippur that year services were shortened at the insistence of the local rabbinic court, to allow the congregants to return home to eat and fortify themselves.

When these measures failed to stem the epidemic, “the local extremists organized and decided to stop the epidemic with a show of strength.”

¹³ Meir Zokrovitch, “The Bride of the Town” in *Sefer Zambrow*, 401–403.

They raided a local Jewish-owned mill and removed the heavy millstone, which they buried in a local cemetery. Their reported refrain was “just as the stream of water has changed, may this plague be exorcised.”

There was no improvement and a second folk-remedy was invoked. All of the worn-out books and pages that contained Jewish teachings, known as *sheimot* (i.e., pages containing God’s holy names) were gathered from both homes and the synagogue and put into boxes. These were then placed on the same cart that was used to carry the dead. Zokrovitch continues:

There was a large funeral, the likes of which no-one had ever seen before. All the inhabitants of the town, both young and old lined up as mourners behind the hearse. The elders of the town read from the Book of Psalms responsively verse by verse, and the people replied in tears. Many tore their clothes as they would for the dead and sat in mourning on the ground. But the plague continued undiminished.

It was only after these two interventions failed that a plague wedding was arranged, between a spinster named Hanna Yenta and Velvel, an unmarried homeless man with a stutter. They were dressed “like royalty” and were provided with a furnished apartment. All the townsfolk including the non-Jews, came to rejoice with the couple, “and the reward for this *mitzva* helped us, for God saw our suffering, changed his mind, and removed the plague.” And then comes this touching final description: “From then on, Hanna Yenta was known as the ‘The Bride of the Town.’ Everyone helped to ensure she was provided for, and she became the water-carrier for her town, happy and content for her good fortune.”

The Earliest Account of a Wedding in Response to an Epidemic

The Memorial Books provide evidence that the custom had been observed in many towns across Europe, although many of the descriptions are not dated. Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers allow us to pinpoint the dates of some of the ceremonies, but it is challenging to determine the earliest published source. The earliest date of a wedding as a response to an outbreak of disease appears in Avraham Hayyim Michelson’s *Obel Elimelekh*, published in Przemsł, Poland in 1910. This work is an anthology of stories about Rabbi Elimelekh Weisblum of Lizhensk (1717-1787), a prominent student of the Maggid of Mezeritch. Rabbi Elimelekh is most commonly referred to by the name of his popular commentary on the Torah, *Noam Elimelekh*.

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In 1785 there was a cholera outbreak, and R. Elimelekh arranged for a penniless bride (aged 36) to marry his water carrier (aged 30):

The Maggid of Kozhnitz [Yisrael Hopstein] played the violin and the Rebbe of Lublin [Yaakov Yitzhak Halevi Horovitz] was the jester. And on Friday night they entertained the bride and groom... Rabbi Shmuel was with Reb Elimelekh, and Reb Elimelekh suggested they go and entertain the couple. They stood outside and heard the Rebbe of Lublin reciting rhyming jokes and saw everyone was dancing. Reb Elimelekh said "Look, there is fire that surrounds them all." Reb Elimelekh took a napkin and wiped the eyes of Rabbi Shmuel, and he could then see that indeed there was fire that surrounded them.

Reb Elimelech danced with them for more than an hour... and after he finished he said "Master of the universe, on account of the mitzvah of these dances, may we merit that at least one coal that awaits us at the entrance to Gehinnom be extinguished."¹⁴

Although the story describes an event that was said to have taken place some 80 years before other accounts, it contains details of the ceremony that are found in the later sources, namely a pandemic, a destitute bride and groom, and an emphasis on the joy and merrymaking that accompanied the wedding. However, it lacks one important detail, making no mention of the marriage having been performed in a cemetery. In addition, because the book was published in 1910, it is not a contemporary record of the events that it records, and its historicity must be carefully considered.

The Plague Wedding Reaches North America

As Jewish refugees crossed the Atlantic from Europe to North America, we might have expected plague weddings to have firmly remained a feature of the shtetl. But this was not the case. The ceremony was imported into the United States and Canada in the first decades of the last century, when, once again, Jews turned to its power in the face of another pandemic, this time, the worst in recorded history: The Great Influenza of 1918. On Friday afternoon, October 24, 1918 at 3 o'clock, the Jews of Philadelphia attended a black wedding at the Jewish cemetery near Cobbs Creek, and an account was published in the *Public Ledger of Philadelphia*:

¹⁴ Avraham Chayim Michelson, *Obel Elimelekh* (Przemysl, 1910), 66.

With the hope of protecting the Orthodox Russian Jews of Philadelphia from further ravages of the influenza epidemic, Harry Rosenberg, 711 S. Fourth Street, was married to Mrs. Fanny Jacobs at the first line of graves....

With the grim white and gray tombstones and monuments as background, more than 1,200 Russian Jews, in silence and awe, watched Rabbi Lipschutz perform the wedding ceremony.

And when amid their stark surroundings, the couple were pronounced man and wife, the orthodox among the spectators filed solemnly past the couple and made them presents of money in sums from ten cents to a hundred dollars, according to the means and circumstances of the donor, until more than \$1,000 had been given.

The last monetary offering made, the bride and bridegroom walked to the greensward further from the graves, where a wedding feast was quickly spread from the two truck-loads of food which others of the faithful had provided.

This marriage in a cemetery, with the idea of warding off the ravages of an epidemic, is a revival of a custom which has prevailed for hundreds of years among the Jews in the heart of Russia. The participants in the ceremony say that when Russia was swept by cholera several centuries ago Jews died by the hundreds. Panic seized them and a council of elders and rabbis was called.

They decided that the attention of God would be called to the affliction of their fellows if the most humble man and woman among them should join in marriage in the presence of the dead.

So they searched for a young man and a woman who were unknown to each other and were without wealth, who were willing to marry to save their fellows from the cholera scourge. When they had been found each was asked if willing to become sanctified by marriage in the presence of the dead. The young people agreed, and the ceremony was performed. Money was contributed to give them the necessary start in life. And, according to the tradition, the ravages of the cholera subsided within three days.

The custom has often been repeated in Russia since then, the last time some fifty years ago.

When the recent epidemic of influenza began to take its toll of the Russian Jews in Philadelphia by the score, some of the elders, now residents of

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the city, but who had witnessed the reported staying of the cholera in Russia fifty years ago by the marriage in the graveyard, determined to invoke the efficacy of the custom to save the lives of their remaining fellows.¹⁵

Ironically, this report was reprinted in a Jewish newspaper under a large advertisement for burial plots. In the midst of the Great Flu Pandemic that would kill over 675,000 people in America and more than 50 million worldwide, The Rosehill Cemetery Company was offering a sale: a single grave for the special price of only \$50.

Two weeks later, on Monday, November 11, 1918, the ceremony was performed further north, in Winnipeg, Canada. It too was reported in a local newspaper:

The “Wedding of Death,” an ancient Hebrew ceremony established about 2,000 years ago to stay the ravages of a plague was celebrated at East Kildonan Cemetery this afternoon, as a sacrifice to stay the “flu” epidemic.

Hebrews and Gentiles alike were present to witness the ceremony.

It was the first wedding under the old orthodox religion ever staged in Canada, it was claimed. Prohibited at all other times, the ceremony was held at the orders of Rabbis Khanovitch and Gorodsky.

The wedding was most elaborate and had been planned for more than a month.

At one end of the cemetery a quorum of ten Jews conducted a funeral. At the other, 1,000 Gentiles and Jews witnessed the wedding.

¹⁵ “Strangers Wed in Cemetery to Ward Off Grip Epidemic,” *Public Ledger of Philadelphia* (October 21, 1918), reprinted in the *The Reform Advocate* (October 26, 1918), 283. Moshe Lipschutz, the rabbi who performed the ceremony was born in Galicia and arrived in Philadelphia around 1911. He became known as “*der zekster tsadik*” because of his residence on Sixth Street in Philadelphia, only two blocks from the home on Fourth Street of the groom, Harry Rosenberg. See Ira Robinson, *Translating a Tradition: Studies in American Jewish History* (Academic Studies Press, 2008), 217. He died on July 8, 1975, making him, at the time of his death perhaps the last surviving rabbi to have officiated at such a wedding prior to the COVID outbreak. The wedding was held in an area known today as the Mount Moriah Cemetery, and is largely in disrepair. The earliest section was bought by the B’nai Israel Dutch Congregation in 1852. See <http://thecemeterytraveler.blogspot.com/2011/08/abandoned-jewish-cemeteries.html>.

The ancient Jewish “Song of Life” was played. On the west side of the cemetery, at the same time, Jews were chanting the wail of death, as a body was committed to the grave.

Harry Fleckman and Dora Wisman were the contracting parties at the wedding. Rabbis Khanovitch and Gorodsky officiated.

Following the ceremonies, services were conducted by the rabbis. Ancient Jewish chapters reserved for these ceremonies were chanted by the rabbis, and so repeated by all Jews present as the wedding procession marched out of the cemetery.¹⁶

Although the report contains a number of errors, it documents what had never previously been recorded: the simultaneous conduction of a plague wedding and a funeral at the same cemetery.¹⁷ Also noteworthy is the very large crowd, and the presence of those from outside the Jewish community. These are features that were also reported in Eastern European newspapers. A third recorded plague wedding to halt influenza in North America occurred on Sunday, November 3, 1918, in Mount Hebron, NY, and was reported in both Yiddish and English language newspapers.¹⁸ The original Yiddish account reported neither the reason for the wedding nor the names of the bride and groom. Instead, it focused largely on the unseemly

¹⁶ “Hebrews Hold ‘Wedding of Death’ to Halt ‘Flu,’” *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* (November 11, 1918).

¹⁷ There is no evidence that the ceremony was established 2,000 years ago. Indeed, as we noted, the earliest reported date of a plague wedding is from 1785. There is also no evidence of any prayers that were unique to the occasion, and it was clearly not the first Orthodox Jewish wedding to have taken place in Winnipeg. (Perhaps the newspaper meant it was the first black wedding in Winnipeg; that is certainly highly likely!) Rabbi Israel Isaac Kahanovitch (note proper spelling), served as Chief Rabbi of Winnipeg and Western Canada for almost 40 years, moving there in 1907. Kahanovitch (1872-1945) was born in Grodno, Poland, had studied at *yeshivot* in Grodno and Slobodka, and had been ordained by one of the leading scholars of his day, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, the author of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*. He established the Winnipeg Hebrew Free School and was a committed Zionist. That a rabbi of his obvious erudition performed a plague wedding supports the suggestion that it was, if not a mainstream practice, at least one that was endorsed by senior rabbinic leaders. In March 2016 the Historic Parks and Monuments Board of Canada unveiled a plaque to honor the work of Rabbi Kahanovitch.

¹⁸ The primary source is a report on the front page of the Yiddish daily *Der Tog* (November 4, 1918). Another report is found in *The Sentinel*, but it is not an eyewitness account, and is based on the earlier report in *Der Tog*. See Gotthard Deutch, “A Wedding in the Cemetery,” *The Sentinel* (November 22, 1918). See also “Wedding in Cemetery,” *The Evening World* (November 4, 1918), which reported the names of the couple: Rose Schwartz and Abraham Lachterman.

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behavior of those who attended. There were more than 10,000 spectators, and “all the paths between the graves were blocked by cars and trucks.” Several auctions were held within the cemetery immediately before the wedding; these sold the rights to hold the bottle of wine that was used, the rights to pour the wine, and the rights to hold each of the four posts that supported the *huppa*. (The right to hold the final post was sold for \$25, the equivalent of around \$450 today.) The ceremony itself began after sunset, when the bride and groom arrived accompanied by people holding torches. “At that moment,” the reporter concluded, “a hearse appeared. It quickly drove up to a fresh grave, another victim of the Spanish Influenza.”¹⁹

The Plague Wedding in Yiddish and Hebrew Literature

In his famous work *Fishke der Krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*), the Yiddish author Mendele Mocher Seforim describes the misfortune of the central character, an itinerant beggar named Fishke. It was not enough that “he had a big flat head and a large broad mouth with yellow crooked teeth [that he] lisped, could not pronounce an ‘r’ and limped badly.” To really understand the plight of Fishke the reader needed one more detail.

He had even been forgotten during the recruiting of “cholera grooms,” that is, when the Kahal of Glupsk snatched the most hideous cripples, beggars and vagrants and frantically married them off to each other to frighten the epidemic away.

The first time this happened, Kahal chose to honor not Fishke but the famous cripple Yontl who had no legs and moved around on his seat by

¹⁹ Other plague weddings in response to the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 were recorded. One occurred in Odessa and was reported in a local Russian newspaper; see *Odesskiye Novosti* (October 2, 1918). It reads in part:

A wedding was arranged yesterday in the Jewish cemetery in order to contain the two epidemics raging in Odessa—the Spanish Disease [influenza] and cholera.... Those who arranged this wedding at the Odessa Jewish cemetery followed the examples of Berdichev, Kiev, Zhytomyr and other cities. The wedding of a poor Jewish couple took place at the first Jewish cemetery at three in the afternoon. A crowd of thousands gathered.... For a long time the newlyweds were not able to reach the hall, because the crowd wanted to see them.... The organizers of this wedding... collected several thousand rubles as a dowry for them, as well as many other valuable gifts.

(I am grateful to my colleague Elena Zehr for her translation from the Russian, and to librarians at the National Library of Ukraine for tracking down and providing me with a copy of the original.)

pushing two little wooden blocks. He was mated with a well-known beggar woman who had teeth like spades and no underlip. The cholera epidemic was so terror stricken by this pair that it wiped out a good part of the population in its fright, after which it took to its heels and fled.

The second time, Fishke was again by-passed in favor of Nechemtsieh the Village Idiot. Before an assemblage of city notables, all of them fine Jews, at the cemetery, this poor fool placed a bridal crown and cover on the head of a girl whose head had been covered since childhood because of cankerous sores and about whom it was rumored that she was, pardon the expression, a hermaphrodite. It was said that the assembled crowd made unusually merry at this wedding and that an ocean of brandy was consumed among the tombstones.... To make a long story short, Kahal had forgotten Fishke. Once again the cholera came to Glupsk and still it did not help Fishke.²⁰

This passage is notable for several reasons. That it describes the plague wedding with barely any explanation suggests that the ceremony would have been familiar to the reader. The author also sarcastically notes what surely must have been common knowledge: that the ceremony did nothing to stem the epidemics. Finally, Mendele's description of the celebration among the tombstones suggests that he may have himself witnessed a plague wedding. This story was made into a Yiddish film released in 1939, in which the hero is married to a blind orphan in an effort to ward off a cholera epidemic.²¹ The plague wedding is also mentioned in a Yiddish short story by the Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (d. 1991) called *Gimpl Tam* (*Gimpel the Fool*) published in 1945.²²

²⁰ Mendele Mocher Seforim, *Fishke the Lame* (Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 46 (first published in Yiddish 1869). Later in the story "the famous cripple Yontl" meets Fishke and extolls the virtues of his bride. "Did you ever hear of a cholera wife that turned out to be good? She should have died from the cholera but she became my wife. Her lower lip was missing, but that didn't keep her mouth from working, screaming, making noise all day long, grinding away like a mill, worse than a woman with two healthy lips" (187).

²¹ The 94-minute black-and-white Yiddish film, "*Fishke der krumer*," was released under the English title "The Light Ahead." It has been recently restored with new English subtitles and is available from the National Center for Jewish Film (jewishfilm.com). The film is discussed in some detail in Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 221–223.

²² The story was translated by Saul Bellow and published in English in 1953. The reference to a plague wedding is brief and easily overlooked. Gimpel is to be married to an orphan named Elka, at the behest of the leaders of the town who also took care of the wedding arrangements. "It so happened that there was a dysentery epidemic at the time. The ceremony was held at the cemetery gates, near the little corpse-washing hut. The fellows got drunk." See Isaac Bashevis Singer. *Collected Stories: Gimpel the*

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The ceremony is mentioned as the object of disdain in a book-length satirical Hebrew poem called *Kehal Refa'im*, published in 1870 by Moshe Leib Lilienblum (d. 1910).²³ And finally, we should note that S.Y. Agnon mentioned the “black wedding” in his Hebrew novels, *Hakhmasat Kalla* (*The Bridal Canopy*), set in nineteenth century Galicia, and *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*), in early twentieth-century Palestine.²⁴

Our review thus far has revealed that far from being a rare event, plague weddings were recognizable features of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and even, in some cases, in the New World. This prevalence was reflected in Yiddish literature and film. They occurred in response to different hardships, including economic peril, faced by the Jewish communities, although the most common cause was an outbreak of disease.²⁵

The Origins and Explanations of the Plague Wedding

Some have tried to explain the origins of the Plague Wedding by looking at the general cultural milieu in which it flourished. Notably, Hanna Wegrzynek explored the Slavic customs for examples from where the custom may have crossed over into the Polish Jewish communities.²⁶ For

Fool to the Letter Writer. New York, The Library of America 2004. Another writer, Joseph Opatoshu published a story in 1931 in Yiddish titled “*A khasne oyfen beys-olem*” which is discussed in Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 216–219.

²³ Moshe Leib Lilienbaum, *Kehal Refa'im* (Odessa, 1870).

²⁴ In *The Bridal Canopy*, Agnon mentions how a black canopy was used in a different ceremony which was also known as a black wedding. In this instance, a wedding of sorts was performed under a black canopy for a woman who died without having been married. See S.Y. Agnon, *The Bridal Canopy* (Toby Press, 2015), 63. In *Only Yesterday* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 590, Agnon described a number of epidemics that had plagued Jerusalem. These included malaria, influenza, and meningitis. In response, leaders and officials declared fast days and circulated “new pamphlets with old bans on secular schools.” And they held “a wedding for two orphans on the Mount of Olives to stop the plague.” Many thanks to Jeffrey Saks for bringing these references to my attention.

²⁵ Further evidence of the presence of the ceremony in Jewish life can be found in the fact that it featured in a long ethnographic questionnaire that was distributed between 1912 and 1914. Known as “*Dos Yidishe Etnografishe Program*” it contained over 2,000 questions and was to have been sent to all of the communities in the Pale of Settlement, although this was cut short by the outbreak of World War I. The survey asked “Do you know stories about weddings in cemeteries carried out as protections against misfortune? Does this occur only during a plague, or also in other cases, and if so in which ones?” (Question 1319). “Would it ever happen that in order to stop an epidemic, a marriage ceremony would be held in the cemetery?” (Question 1633). See Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Wegrzynek, “*Shvartzte Khasene*.”

example, a Christian wedding procession through a cemetery was a common sight because Churches and cemeteries were usually situated next to each other in small villages and towns. In addition, there were so-called “graveyard feasts” that were held throughout the Christian calendar, and particularly around Easter. But although there were elaborate “rituals related to Slavic ancestor cults” in the Orthodox Christian Church, she notes that “several factors militate against a straightforward linkage between Jewish and Slavic or Christian rituals.” In the end Wegrzynek was not able to identify any ceremony or tradition outside of the Jewish community from where the plague wedding may have originated.

Explanations for the ceremony are found in two collections of Jewish customs. The first, *Sefer Matamim (A Book of Delights)* was published in Warsaw in 1890 by Isaac Lipiec (1830-1913). He wrote that the reward for charity and marrying off a bride is a long life, and that doing so “contained many good deeds.” But he added another explanation, one that was not mystical but rather psychological:

Everyone gathers at the bridal canopy in the cemetery where there is rejoicing and many musical instruments. And this joy uplifts the masses so they will not be depressed, for this is itself dangerous... and they will be used to going to the cemetery and will not fear death.²⁷

In a later edition of the book Lipiec added an explanation of the custom of burying worn out holy books, mentioned above, in response to a plague:

We fear that perhaps the plague has come because of the sin of discarding documents on which is written God’s name and the great disgrace that follows. Therefore, we make a large public display with many people attending in order to keep them happy and have them forget about the plague. For it is known that fear and panic cause great harm. This is the reason that we make these large events during this time, for it is to distract the people away from their fear and towards other things, so they may be happy, and have no concerns.

This is also the reason that two paupers are married in public: to make everyone happy. For it is well known that we, the Children of Israel have a difficult time being happy. For we are forbidden from attending the “theater or the circus,” and so we look for ways to be happy through a mitzva, like that of burying worn out holy books or attending the

²⁷ Isaac Lipiec, *Sefer Matamim* (Warsaw, 1890), 73.

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wedding of two paupers. For everyone can take part in this mitzva and in its joy.²⁸

These reasons should be noted for two things. First, they suggested (for the first time in the literature of the plague wedding) that the outbreak was a divine response to one particular sin: failing to treat holy books with the requisite respect. However Lipiec offered no evidence for this assertion. And second, Lipiec claimed that in fact there was no intrinsic mystical or religious act that was demonstrated by the plague wedding. It was, in essence, a distraction from the awful reality of unremitting illness and death. Perhaps, had conventional forms of entertainment been an option, the Jewish cemeteries of Eastern Europe might not have been hosting weddings in a cemetery at all.

A similar explanation is found in the second collection of customs, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (*A Treasury of Jewish Customs*) by Abraham Eliezer Hirshovitz (1859-1928), who immigrated to the United States in 1908 and published his work in St. Louis in 1918. Hirshovitz added that as well as these marriages, another response would be to bury old holy books, which would invoke divine mercy, “for just as we care for the holy word of God and holy books so that they should not be lost or desecrated, so may God have mercy on us and on his children that we should not be lost or desecrated, for we are called a Holy Nation, and God’s name is entwined with our own.” And he echoed the psychological benefits of the plague wedding: “All of the inhabitants of the town gather [in the cemetery] to rejoice with the bride and groom and forget their worries and problems, for this can itself be a threat to life, and by doing so the fear of death will no longer constantly face them.”²⁹

This need for distraction is found in another work, the autobiographical *Mekor Barukh*, published in 1928 by Barukh Halevi Epstein (1860-1942). Epstein recorded that on Yom Kippur 5630 (September 15, 1869) Rabbi Yisroel Salanter had publicly made *kiddush* and eaten in the Great Synagogue of Vilna, in order to emphasize the medical need to eat and

²⁸ Isaac Lipiec, *Sefer Matamim he-Hadash* (Warsaw, 1894), 62. The author cites *Megillat Ta’anit* which records a decree made during the Hasmonean dynasty that all legal documents contain the name of God. When these documents were no longer needed, “the name of God in Heaven was discarded in garbage dumps.” Lipiec wrote that when a plague broke out, “we are concerned that perhaps because of this sin, in which the names of God lie in the garbage and are completely disrespected, this troubled time has come upon us.”

²⁹ Abraham Hirshovitz, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (Moinseter Printing Co., 1918), 97.

drink during a severe cholera epidemic.³⁰ After describing the scene, Epstein digressed and recalled the utter sadness and desperation of the Jewish community.

It is not a surprise that at that time the entire city was sad and ruined, miserable, in pain and dejected, tortured and depressed; their lives were not livable.

The doctors warned time and time again that these sad and bitter emotions must be prevented. It was clear that they increased the likelihood of catching the disease, so they advised anyone with ability to minimize the sad atmosphere, and to encourage jokes and levity. There are many great benefits to this.³¹

While the medical cause of cholera remained a mystery and its severity was unprecedented, the connection between mood and susceptibility to disease seems to have been apparent to both the medical professionals and rabbinic leadership.³² Another example is found in the work of a British physician named Bisset Hawkins, who published his *History of the Epidemic Spasmodic Cholera of Russia* in 1831. It was, to use his own words, “a copious account of the disease.” Hawkins made no claim to be an original investigator. Instead he was collecting “into a convenient and ready form the scattered information which has been as yet obtained concerning a topic of universal interest.” And in his “preservative regimen recommended... against an attack of epidemic cholera” Hawkins recommended that “[t]he imagination should not be allowed for a moment, to dwell upon the painful considerations which the disease is calculated to bring before the mind; and least of all ought dread of it to be encouraged.”³³ That same year, Reginald Orton, another British physician, published his own account of the cholera epidemic in India. In it, he cited “directions issued by the Russian Government to the people” that he considered to be “as complete a brief code of instructions... as could be imagined.” “A very important means of safety,” he wrote, “is to repress all tendency to

³⁰ In *Mekor Barukh* it is recorded that this occurred in the year 5630, which corresponded to 1869-1870, but this is likely the result of a typographical or transcription error. All other reports date it to Yom Kippur 5607, corresponding to September 30, 1846.

³¹ Baruch Halevi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh* (Vilna, 1928), vol. 2, 1012-1013.

³² For a recent review see N. W. Andersson, et al., “Depression and the Risk of Severe Infections: Prospective Analyses on a Nationwide Representative Sample,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 45:1 (2016), 131-139.

³³ Bisset Hawkins, *History of the Epidemic Spasmodic Cholera of Russia* (London, 1831).

depression and chagrin, and to preserve a cheerfulness and tranquility of mind.”³⁴ It is therefore notable to find that together with the descriptions of these weddings are accounts that emphasized the levity and carnival-like atmosphere which accompanied them.

The Plague Wedding as Carnival

In his book length essay on the subject, Terry Eagleton notes that humor often addresses that which we fear the most: death.

What Freud calls *Thanatos* or the death drive pulverizes meaning and value, and is thus bound up with that fleeting derangement of sense we know as humor. Like humor this Dionysian force garbles sense, confounds hierarchies, merges identities, scrambles distinctions and revels in the collapse of meaning, which is why carnival, which accomplishes all this too, is never far from the cemetery.³⁵

In reading the many eyewitness accounts of plague weddings in both Europe and North America, one surprising feature is the description of the joy that accompanied the ceremonies. Given the desperate circumstances that had led to the marriage, and the unfortunate lives of the bride and groom themselves, as well as the somber location that was chosen for the wedding, we would have expected that the ceremony would be performed quickly and with only a modest nod to the usual traditional celebration. In fact, we find precisely the opposite. There was a happy, carnival-like atmosphere in which the local non-Jewish population often participated.

Here are but a few of the many examples demonstrating this previously overlooked aspect of the plague wedding. London’s *Jewish Chronicle*, which was an important source (and often the only source) of news about Jewish life outside of Great Britain, could barely hide its contempt when it described the ceremony as a “grotesque theatrical performance.”³⁶ Mendele Mocher Seforim’s novel noted that “the assembled crowd made unusually merry at this wedding and that an ocean of brandy was consumed among the tombstones.”³⁷ The 1866 plague wedding in Jerusalem, with which we opened this essay, was described as “a very joyous occasion.”³⁸ During the above referenced wedding in Gorlice in 1896

³⁴ Reginald Orton, *An Essay on the Epidemic Cholera of India* (Burgess and Hill, 1831), 456.

³⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Humor* (Yale University Press, 2019), 9–10.

³⁶ “The Epidemic of Meningitis,” *The Jewish Chronicle* (April 23, 1909).

³⁷ Mendele, *Fishke the Lame*, 46.

³⁸ Porush, *Early Memories (Zikbronot Rishonim)*, 22.

there were Jews “dressed as Cossacks on horseback,” who escorted the bride and groom to their graveside bridal canopy, and surely added to the carnivalesque atmosphere.³⁹ And at an undated plague wedding that took place in the small Ukrainian town of Szumsk, “the liquor flowed like water.”⁴⁰

There were exceptions of course. The 1918 Philadelphia wedding in response to the Great Influenza Pandemic took place “in silence and awe,” but at the New York wedding in the same year the attendants were described as laughing throughout.⁴¹ At the earliest plague wedding, reported to have taken place in 1785, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Halevi Horovitz (d. 1815) who was known as the Seer of Lublin was the wedding’s “jester” (*badkhn*). And at the very last recorded plague wedding in Europe, which took place in the darkest years of the Holocaust, the same role of jester was taken by a writer by the name of Lichtenstein. Like the Seer of Lublin, some 150 years earlier, he also composed a special wedding song, and “the attendees enjoyed themselves.”⁴² As the *Judenrat* kept order, there was no hint of despair. It was a celebration in every sense of the word.

This aspect of the plague wedding as carnival reminds us of the work of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (d. 1975), and his influential *Rabelais and His World*.⁴³ While Bakhtin was focused on the carnival as a feature of medieval life and literature, two of his observations are germane to the plague wedding. First, the carnival was often a *bottom-up affair*, organized by the people “in their own way” rather than by the ruling class.⁴⁴ And second, the carnival is *oppositional*, or one might even argue, antinomian, and some features of the wedding certainly aroused concern and criticism from both those who aligned themselves with the *Haskala* and traditional rabbinic leaders alike.

In a recent book on marginalized Jews in the shtetl, Natan Meir suggested that the plague (or as he termed it the *cholera*) wedding may be interpreted as a form of sacrificial offering. These marginalized Jews, made up of “the destitute, disabled and the mad” might sometimes “serve as scapegoats for any heavenly decree that might bring harm.” Meir also

³⁹ Bar-On, ed. *Sefer Gorlice. The Gorlice Book*, 96.

⁴⁰ Z. Chazon, “A Wedding in a Cemetery” in *Szumsk: Sefer Zikaron Likadoshey Szumsk*, 384.

⁴¹ As reported on the front page of the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*, *A Huge Wedding Canopy Erected in a Cemetery with a Thousand In-Laws* (November 4, 1918), 1.

⁴² “The Typhus Epidemic and a Wedding in a Cemetery” (Yiddish), in *Yizkor Book Fun Der Zelekhover Yiddisher Kehilla*, 225.

⁴³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁴⁴ These observations are originally found in Ben Taylor, “Bakhtin, Carnival and Comic Theory,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Nottingham, 1995).

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noted that an earlier Yiddish ethnographer named Naftuli Vaynig (b. 1897) had interpreted the plague wedding “as a kind of modern-day sacrifice in which the community sacrificed the bridal couple (as a substitute for itself) in order to appease God, the gods, or demons.”⁴⁵ Meir reaches the following conclusion:

Despite the enormous chronological and cultural divides, the affinities between these scapegoat rituals and the cholera wedding are notable. In a time of great danger to society, marginal people are selected as scapegoats and put through a degrading ritual that places them, however briefly, at the center of the community. In the cholera wedding, the bride and groom function as substitute victims for the epidemic, married in the shadow of death in the cemetery itself, as though the entire community was pleading with the Destroying Angel: They are already half-dead. Please cast your gaze on them and not on us.⁴⁶

Opposition to the Plague Wedding

The first recorded signs of opposition to the ceremony are from Hebrew newspapers and periodicals published in Russia during the cholera outbreak of 1866. In September of that year, *Ha-Karmel* published a piece by Shimon Yehuda Stanislawsky.⁴⁷ “Once upon a time” he wrote, “when foolishness reigned and the light of wisdom did not shine among the Jews, they would do silly and stupid things, and place their faith in all kinds of falsehoods and worthless interventions.” Stanislawsky had hoped that these superstitions were a thing of the past. “So who would have believed that today,” he continued, “in this generation in the nineteenth century... a time when the Jews are also waking from their slumbers, that there would still be found people who cling to stupidity.... And should you, dear reader, ask me what was this awful act, and what am I getting so worked up about, pay attention and I will explain.” Cholera had overtaken a Ukrainian city called Ekatarinoslav (today known as Dnipro) and its leaders had taken important measures to help end the suffering of the poor, measures that Stanislawsky credited with saving many lives. However, the town had undertaken a further step in its fight against the epidemic:

⁴⁵ See Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 112–115, and the references there.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 114. Meir also suggested that the wedding served “as a form of kosher entertainment acceptable to pious Jews.”

⁴⁷ Shimon Yehudah Stanislawsky, “Yekaterinoslav,” *Ha-Karmel* (August 14, 1866), 123. I present a free translation from the very archaic Hebrew.

On a certain day they gathered to figure out how to fight the plague and end the suffering. They took a young man and a young woman from the most impoverished of their people, and, accompanied with drums and pipes, they led them to the cemetery where they entered into the covenant of marriage. Everyone ate and drank and expressed the belief that this was the cure for cholera. My heart sank and my face fell as I witnessed this. I could not believe that in this day and age our fellow Jews would believe in this bizarre idea. I asked them about this, what were they doing, and what was the origin of this custom. Their mouths filled with laughter and they replied, “This custom is from our ancestors who must certainly have known what it was that they were doing.” These people did not know that not every old custom is good, and that there are foolish and idiotic customs.

Stanislowky ended his report with the hope that eventually reason would win out, although he admitted the road ahead was long and uncertain.

About 50 years after these disapproving reports in the Hebrew newspapers, another appeared, but this time half a continent away in English. The same report in *The Jewish Chronicle*, mentioned above, described the meningitis epidemic in Jerusalem barely a month earlier. “Too much praise,” it wrote, “cannot be given to Schaare Zedek [sic] Hospital, which standing alone as it does here among the Jewish hospitals with its European equipment, its isolation pavilions for infectious diseases, its electrically-worked, great, disinfecting apparatus, is in fact the only institution here capable of efficiency in an epidemic like that raging here at present.”⁴⁸ The epidemic was brutal. It had a fatality rate of over 30%, which rose to over 40% in young children who were its most frequent victims. The meningitis outbreak was so severe that the leading experimental pathologist of the time, Simon Flexner of the Rockefeller Institute, had sent large quantities of serum to inoculate the inhabitants of the Holy City.⁴⁹ Shaarei Zedek had been “the first to use and to supply the anti-meningococcic serum, as well as disinfecting all houses in which cases have happened.”

Together with this cutting-edge science (the serum had only been available in the United States for about three years), *The Jewish Chronicle* reported another intervention: “two weddings [performed] in the cemetery in the Valley of Johosophat.”

⁴⁸ “The Epidemic of Meningitis,” *The Jewish Chronicle*.

⁴⁹ Simon Flexner. “The Present Status of the Serum Therapy of Epidemic Cerebr spinal Meningitis,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 53:18 (1909), 1443–1445. For a review of the importance of Flexner’s discoveries in combating meningitis, see J. M. Barry, *The Great Influenza* (Penguin, 2005), 73–79.

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Thousands of spectators crowded the graveyard—lemonade sellers clinked their glasses, which passed unrinsed from mouth to mouth—during the epidemic, the contagion of which is carried chiefly through the mouth! Money was collected from onlookers for the couples, the bridegrooms refusing to be married until a goodly sum had been put together—and, at last, in the dusk, the ceremonies took place, snapshotted by tourists, particulars neatly jotted down into note-books by conversionists. One is constrained to ask if panic has not unbalanced the minds of the people. The sacrifice of a wedding in a cemetery in time of dire illness is not unknown in Jewish records of the Middle Ages—and if it had been done in all quietness the young couple praying in their hearts, “Dear God, Thou lovest the children and desirest their existence; see, we come before Thee, to be joined in holy wedlock in the very place where the little ones rest—we trust in Thee,” one could say: “it is a Jerusalem custom.” But announced, proclaimed, haggled over, turned into a grotesque theatrical performance as it was, it must stand as a disgrace in Jerusalem.

The correspondent had no opposition to the plague wedding itself, and even suggested a prayer that might have been offered by the bride and groom. But he objected to the circumstances that *accompanied* the wedding.

It was not only the press or a member of the *Haskala* like Stanislawsky who objected to the practice. Some rabbis did so as well. The Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Melitz*, published in Russia, reported with approval about the efforts of the leadership in Berdichev to care for its poor during an epidemic. However, it noted that the town “had been seduced into holding a wedding in a cemetery and awaken the dead from their eternal rest.” A crowd had already gathered when “our wise rabbi and teacher Rabbi Yozpe stood in the breach and scattered them from the cemetery. Instead they performed the marriage in front of the synagogue in the Old City. May he go from strength to strength... and great is his reward.”⁵⁰ The suggestion is that while the marriage of two impoverished orphans in a cemetery as a response to an epidemic was inappropriate, such a marriage might be performed elsewhere with no objection.

There is almost no mention of the ceremony in responsa literature. One exception is a *teshuva* from Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Schwadron (1835-1911) which examines whether a *kohen* may attend the wedding, since *kohanim* are generally forbidden to enter a cemetery.⁵¹ Rabbi

⁵⁰ *Ha-Melitz* (August 25, 1866).

⁵¹ *Shut Maharsham* 4:40. The *teshuva* is cited in *Tzitz Eliezer* (4:15) in a general discussion about a *kohen* entering a cemetery. The ceremony is also mentioned in

Schwadron's analysis is focused on the architecture of the particular cemetery and the location of its graves. Basing himself on previous decisions, he ruled leniently and permitted the *kohen* to attend on technical considerations, adding that "we too must rule leniently, in order to lessen the troubles of masses who believe in this." He concluded with a thought, similar to those considered above, which addresses the psychological benefits of the ceremony.

Also, it is permissible for a *kohen* to walk through a field in which there was a grave whose location is not known in order to perform a mitzva... and it is a mitzva to reassure the masses and calm their fears at this time.

Although the custom is all but ignored in responsa literature, there is a halakhic concern that would seem to challenge its permissibility. This is the prohibition known as "mocking the poor," and is based on a sensitivity for the dead, those "impoverished of *mitzvot*," who are no longer able to perform God's commandments. As codified in *Shulhan Arukh*, it is forbidden to say words of Torah near a grave, and to wear *tzitzit* that are visible.⁵² Despite this unambiguous ruling, there appears to have been no halakhic concerns that prevented the wedding ceremony, together with its many blessings, from having taken place within close proximity to graves.

The Last Recorded Plague Wedding in Europe: Zelechov

The March 2020 wedding that took place in the Ponevezh cemetery appears to have been the first time the practice was undertaken for almost 80 years. The last recorded plague wedding prior to this occurred in the midst of the Holocaust, in the Polish town of Zelechov. When a typhus epidemic broke out there, the leadership quickly arranged their own wedding in a cemetery. This occurred sometime after the Nazis took control of the area.

The leaders also decided to perform a wedding in a cemetery, for it was an old custom. It took place at the same time as a burial of *sheimos* [discarded holy books] which was found in the attic of the *Beyt Midrash*. And so the wedding would be transformed into a funeral for the *sheimos*, which were to be buried. The bride and groom were sought out, for it is not easy to find people prepared to do this. After a long search, a groom was found:

the responsa of Rabbi Yitzhak Weiss, *Shut Siab Yitzhak*, #491, but is not discussed further.

⁵² See *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh De'ah* 344: 15 and *Orah Hayyim* 23. The prohibition is discussed in the Talmud, *Berakhot* 3b.

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Motel, son of Moshe Hersh Bayger. The bride was Chaveleh, daughter of Sarah Yudkes and Velvl Yudkes, a woman aged around 50 years who lived on a little street between the homes of White Chaim and Velvl Vishnier. The bride and groom agreed to the wedding, and that the chuppah should take place at the cemetery near the graves, on condition that the city should agree to provide them with clothing. Two pairs of wooden shoes were quickly provided for them, and the community also bought some old clothing as outfits for the bride and groom.

At the cemetery, the first order was burial of the *sheimos*, and later the wedding ceremony was performed. The Rabbi *z"l* was the wedding officiant. A few prayers were said regarding the plague, and after that everyone wished *mazel tov*. The couple was then taken to the wedding hall in the large premises of the *Judenrat*. The Jewish police under authority of the *Judenrat* kept order. A large meal was prepared, and the attendees together with the bride and groom enjoyed themselves. Wedding presents were given to the bride and groom. Mr. F. Lichtenstein, also known as the “Editor from Lodz,” recited many rhymes which were appropriate for the occasion, and the guests sang along.

This is how the cemetery wedding was celebrated, and it was needed to save the Jews from typhus.⁵³

This wedding in Nazi occupied Poland contained all of the features we have come to recognize as components of a plague wedding: an epidemic, an impoverished couple, a graveyard, community participation, *gramen* rhymes, and general merrymaking. Its participants could hardly have imagined that the next plague wedding would take place within an autonomous State of Israel itself, and be watched across the world over social media. In 2009 the plague wedding crossed over into illustrated children’s literature, with the publication of a short story *The Wedding That Saved a Town*.⁵⁴ In it, a klezmer player named Reb Yiske is summoned by the town rabbi to play at a wedding in Pinsk:

⁵³ “The Typhus Epidemic and a Wedding in a Cemetery” (Yiddish) in *Yizkor Book Fun Der Zelekhover Yiddisher Kehilla*, 225–226. I am indebted to Sharon Shapiro for providing this free translation from the Yiddish. Zelechow is about 53 miles from Warsaw and was invaded by the Nazis on September 12, 1939. The Jewish Council, the *Judenrat*, was established in November 1939. At its height, the ghetto in Zelechow held over 13,000 people. The Nazis murdered the Jews of the village on September 30, 1942. This cemetery wedding must therefore have taken place sometime between late 1939 and October 1942. This makes it the latest recorded date for such a wedding prior to the one held in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵⁴ Yale Strom, *The Wedding That Saved a Town* (Lerner Publishing Group, 2008).

“Rabbi” he said, “why is no one out on such a lovely evening?”

Rabbi Yamfred tugged at his beard. “Ay, Reb Yiske, there is a terrible cholera epidemic. The disease is contagious, and people are afraid to go outside. We have tried everything to rid the town of the disease. We cleaned the streets, boiled our drinking water, and recited psalms. There is just one more thing we can try. Legend says that if two orphans get married in a cemetery, a miracle may happen. We call this wedding a *shvartze chaseneh*—a black wedding.”

“Why a cemetery?” Reb Yiske asked.

“We hope the spirits of loved ones still live in their children and grandchildren,” Rabbi Yamfred explained.

Throughout the book are full-page illustrations, and after the couple has been found and a wedding held among the graves, Reb Yiske receives a telegram that the cholera epidemic has ended. The story walks the fine line between its subject—orphans who lost parents “in a pogrom long ago. Oy. Oy. Oy,” and a town ravaged by disease—and the feelings of hope for a better future that accompany a wedding, even one held in a cemetery. It is an unlikely story for a children’s book, but at its essence it captures the internal tensions raised by the celebration of this unusual ceremony. The plague wedding was always about optimism in a time of destruction, and the anticipation for a better future when prospects for it seemed far from certain. Perhaps its message is especially relevant for these uncertain times.

APPENDIX

I have uncovered nineteen Yizkor Books that record the occurrence of a plague wedding. Many, but not all, are available in the digital collection maintained by the New York Public Library at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/yizkor-book-collection>

1. Babruisk (Belarus): Jacob Garelick, “Stories from My Shtetl,” in *Bobruisk Memorial Book (Sefer Babruisk)*, ed. Judah Slotski (Tel Aviv: Arozi 1967), 815 (Yiddish).
2. Chelm, Poland: Akivah Weinick, “Jewish Life and Creativity in Chelm,” in *Yizkor Book of Chelm* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Pacific Press, 1954), 181 (Yiddish).
3. Tshijevo (Czyżew, Poland): Dov Brokush, “Social Support and Visiting the Sick,” in *Memorial Book Tshijevo*, ed. Shimon Kantz (Tel Aviv: Ben Hur, 1961), 153–154 (Yiddish).

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4. Gorlice (Poland): Mordechai Weinfeld, "A Few of My Memories," in *Gorlice Book: The Community at Rise and Fall*, ed. M.Y. Baron (Tel Aviv: HaPoel HaMizrachi, 1962), 96 (Yiddish).
5. Khotyn (Ukraine): "Jewish Life in Khotyn," in *Sefer Kehillat Khotyn (Beserbia)*, ed. Shlomo Schetnovitser (Tel Aviv: Defus HaMerkaz, 1974), 140–141 (Yiddish).
6. Krynki (Poland): Berl Zakan, "The Way of Life in Krynki," in *Pinkas Krinki*, ed. Dov Rubin (Tel Aviv: Yedah-Selah, 1970), 217–218 (Yiddish).
7. Olika (Ukraine): Nathan Rozenfeld, "The Wedding in the Cemetery," in *Pinkas Hakehilla Olkya*, ed. Nathan Livneh (Tel Aviv: Oreli, 1972), 115 (Hebrew).
8. Opt (Opatow, Poland): Feiga Teitel, "A 'Black' Wedding in Apt," in *Opt: Sefer Zikaron le-Ir ve-Am be-Yisrael Asher Hayetah ve-Einena Od*, ed. Zvi Yasheev (Tel Aviv: Arzei, 1966), 106–107 (Yiddish).
9. Plonsk (Poland): Motel Michalzohn, "The Cholera Epidemic and the Wedding in the Cemetery in the Summer of 1894," in *Sefer Plonsk veha-Serviva.*, ed. Shlomo Tsemach (Tel Aviv: Lidor, 1963), 135–136 (Hebrew).
10. Shumsk (Ukraine): Z. Chazon, "A Wedding in a Cemetery," in *Szumsk: Sefer Zikaron le-Kedoshei Szumsk she-Nispu be-Sho'at ha-Nazi'im bi-Shenat 1942*, ed. Chaim Rabin (no pub.), 382–386 (Yiddish).
11. Strzyżów (Poland): Tzvi Eliezer Sternberg, "Mordechai Goldberg Saves the Shtetl," in *Sefer Strizov veha-Serviva*, ed. Isaac Berglass and Shlomo Yahalomi (Tel Aviv: HaPoel HaMizrachi), 314–315 (Yiddish).
12. Tomaszow Lubelski (Poland): Y. Muskap, "Jewish Ways of Life," in *Tomashover Yizkor Buch* (Brooklyn: Balshon Printing & Offset, 1965), 162–163 (Yiddish).
13. Wloclawek (Poland): Meir Korzen, "The Community: 1900-1939," in *Wloclawek and Vicinity*, ed. Kathriel Thursh and Meir Korzen (Tel Aviv: Achdut Cooperative, 1967), 80 (Yiddish).
14. Wojslawice (Poland): Mendel Schaffer, in *Yizkor Book in Memory of Voislavize*, ed. Shimon Kanc (Tel Aviv: Hatzafon, 1970), 80 (Yiddish).
15. Wolomin (Poland): Noach Schultz, "The Wedding in the Cemetery," in *A Memorial to the Jewish Community of Volomin (Poland)*, ed. Shimon Kanc (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yotzei Volomin BeYisrael, 1971), 335–336 (Yiddish).
16. Yampil (Ukraine): Dovid Rubin, "A Few Paragraphs of My Memories About Yampele," in *Ayara be-Lehavot: Pinkas Yampale*, ed. Aryeh Leib Gelman (Jerusalem: Chaim), 122–125 (Yiddish).

17. Yedinitz (Edinet, Moldova): “The Way of Life,” in *Yad le-Yedinitz* ed. Mordechai Raicher and Yosef Magen-Shitz (Tel Aviv: Orley, 1973), 395–398 (Yiddish).
18. Zambrow (Poland): Meir Zokrovitch, “The Bride of the Town,” in *Sefer Zambrow*, ed. Yom Tov Levisnski (Tel Aviv: Alon, 1963), 401–403 (Hebrew and Yiddish).
19. Żelechów (Poland): “The Typhus Epidemic and a Wedding in a Cemetery,” in *Yizkor Book Fun Der Zelekhover Yiddisher Kehilla*, ed. A. Wolfe Yasni (no pub., 1953), 223–226 (Yiddish).