

**Parallels between *Khurbn Bilgoraj* [one of Bilgoraj yizkor books] and Isaac Bashevis Singer's fiction:**

***Khurbn Bilgoraj***

Whenever the wandering preacher reb Borukh-Tevl would come to the town, the house of study was full, people would come from other study-houses to listen to him. The faithful drew a great pleasure from his sermons and parables about the coming of the Messiah which he would show by means of various quotations and gematria claiming that here is the Messiah standing at the outskirts of our town. <sup>9</sup>

Between the two tables there stood reb Mordekhai-Josef at his pulpit and with his face covered with a red kerchief he peeped into a book making all kinds of gestures and immersing himself in the Kabala. Suddenly he would raise his thick walking stick, strike the pulpit and shout: „Gevalt, it's burning” until everybody gathered around him. Then he would shout even louder: “Gevalt, it's burning, women wear short sleeves”. He would repeat such “fire alarms” many times.

**a rough translation from Yiddish from *Khurbn Bilgoraj*, ed. A. Kronenberg, Tel Aviv 1956, p. 18.**

**Excerpts from Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Satan in Goray*, translated from the Yiddish by Jacob Sloan, The Noonday Press: New York 1958:**

p. 41-43

The newcomer appeared in the holy place between the afternoon and evening prayers. His arrival created a sensation. [...] Womenfolk mingled with menfolk, young men and girls stood together on reading stands and tables. Everyone gaped and listened. [...]

“Judeans,” he said, “I come from our holy land [...] The Jews from the other side of the river Sambation are ready and waiting for the battle of Armageddon. ... The lion that dwelleth on high will descend from Heaven, in his mouth a seven-headed scorpion. ... With fire issuing from his nostrils, he will carry the Messiah into Jerusalem. Gather your strength, O Judeans, and make yourselves ready! ... Happy is the man who shall live to see this!”

The study house became so quiet that a solitary fly could be heard buzzing, beating its wings against the window. [...]

“Jews! Save your-selves! Jews-ws!” someone suddenly shouted, as though he were choking.

The crowd shuddered. It was lame Mordecai Joseph, a cabalist, with a thick fiery beard and bushy eyebrows, a faster, a weeper, an angry man. As he prayed he would beat his head against the wall; on the Days of Awe he would fall to the ground at the Prayer of Petition, like the men of old, and groan out loud. [...] And now, breathing hard, the cripple began to clamber up a table. Those close by lifted him so that he could stand. Reb Mordecai Joseph banged the table with his crutch [...] and he began in his passion to stutter and gasp.

“Jews, why are you silent? Redemption hath come to the world! ... Salvation hath come to the world! ...”

Another scene, p. 49:

“The world’s aflame!” Mordecai Joseph kept pounding with his fist. [...]

Another scene: p. 193

“Reb Mordecai Joseph plunged forward, but he was seized and pulled back. [...]

“Woe!” [*Gevalt!*] he wailed, “Adultery and bloodshed!” [...] Jews, help! The Evil One triumphs! Woe....!”

### ***Khurbn Bilgoraj***

Coming into the town I was filled with despair. I was born in Bilgoraj and lived there until the war, and now, walking around in broad daylight, I barely recognized the city: Lubelska Street, where the synagogue had been located, the great study house, the little study house, the bath house, the slaughterhouse, the Zikhron Yankev Kheyder, the old graveyard, the old rabbi’s house, the new house of the Belzer Rebe’s son, Reb Mordkhe of blessed memory, the meeting houses of the Trisker and Rudniker Hasidim – everything was a void, and in midday there was no living soul to be seen.

The streets were paved with gravestones bearing Jewish inscriptions; this was itself terrifying and made everything seem like a vast graveyard.

I entered a store to buy some butter. It was handed to me wrapped in sheets of the Vilna edition of the Talmud. I stood as if petrified, remembering how hard it had been for a Jew to purchase a Vilna Talmud for his scholarly son-in-law.[...] On my way out, I threw the butter away and hid the holy scraps of the text.

The former cemetery looked like an empty square, with trees cut down, the tombstones torn out, and the surrounding wall taken apart. The cemetery near Layzer Kigl’s house could barely be recognized, there were barracks there as well as a street.

In Bilgoraj, hidden by a Skako from the village of Bajory in the attic of his pigsty my former brothers-in-law survived [...].

from M. Rapaport, “A Visit to My Little Town” in *Khurbn Bilgoraj*, ed. A. Kronenberg, Tel Aviv 1956, pp. 131-132.

### **I.B. Singer “The Last Demon”**

“I can’t find a single one of our men. The cemetery is empty. [...] The community was slaughtered, the holy books burned, the cemetery desecrated. [...] Gentiles wash themselves in the ritual bath. Abraham Zalman’s chapel has been turned into a pigsty. [...] I found a Yiddish storybook between two broken barrels in the house which once belonged to Velvel the barrelmaker...”

from I.B. Singer “The Last Demon” (originally published in Yiddish as “Mayse Tishevits” in *Forverts* in 1959)