

Kahal and Vaad – Jewish Community and World

By Edmund Cohler

As genealogical researchers, we try to understand our historical heritage and the world of our ancestors. If we read, even the least bit, about the past, going beyond the ancestry charts and lineages, we encounter the holy communities (*kehillot kedosh*), *kahals*, ghettos, *shtetls*, *shtetlach*, and other divisions which brought sighs of nostalgia from our grandparents and notice in *landsmanshaftn* and literature of their time. They embodied the concept of Jewish Community that developed in the Diaspora since antiquity. So what were these communities? What did they mean to our ancestors and what did they leave as an inheritance in our time of “One World”?



The Jewish Communities had great similarities throughout the world but most of our ancestors lived on the remains of a great European state - the Polish/Lithuanian Commonwealth, eventually called the Pale of Settlement. So let me describe a little of the history of that place that gave birth to a system of Jewish Communities that was our ancestors' heritage. My tale of history, political geography and demography is drawn with a broad brush that may mask some details and distort others; so, please pardon my imprecision.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Commonwealth had become an enormous state of wealth, power, and intellect, and home to the largest population of Jews in the world. The state, emerging from the Middle Ages, had to be organized to support wealth, public endeavor, and custom. Reigning organizations were legally primitive and essentially geographical, two-dimensional, like a “political map” in an atlas.

That map included many divisions of varying extent, some of which were included in others: Duchies, Estates, Cities, Counties, Provinces, Principalities, Palatinates, Governments, and Districts. Terms and titles differed in place and time. The governors of such political divisions concerned themselves mainly with

public endeavors, roads, military protection, wars, interstate relations, palaces and other governmental buildings. However, “corporate societies” overlaid this political map in a third dimension, each corporation with its own layer. Within a layer there might be some geographic division but it might or might not coincide with the reigning political divisions.

For example, unlike the present world where the “law” has the same boundaries as the political map, each layer in the corporate world had its own laws, its own organization, and its own functions. Within this corporate world, guilds, associations of a religious nature, military

organizations, and other groups with a charter could provide their own laws and their own social organization for almost anything they wanted as long as it didn't conflict with the ruler's interest. This arrangement is looked on today as hopelessly crude, unfair, stultifying and repressive but it was the norm of that era, and was accorded the imprimatur of religions, rulers, wealth, privilege, custom, universities and arms. This system had great stability. Even today, we are wrestling throughout the world with the problem of separating religious corporations and their underlying states.

Jews were routinely excluded from almost all of the corporate layers. It was in this world that the Commonwealth relegated a corporate layer of their own to the Jews. A small unit of the Jewish society was the “*kahal*”, a Polish form of the Hebrew, *kehillah kedosh* (holy community). It wasn't necessarily the smallest unit on the political map. The *shtetl* of Leckava, Lithuanian, in which my mother and her parents were born, was part of the *Vieksniai kahal* that covered three towns: Leckava, *Vieksniai* and *Tirksliai*. At times there were disputes as to which *Kahal* a *shtetlach* should report. During the period of the Commonwealth the *kahal's* governmental functions were pervasive:

- As far as the Commonwealth was concerned, the *kahal* was primarily responsible for the payment of

taxes to the Government. In this role, it appointed tax assessors (*shamma'im*) and tax collectors (*gabbai ei hamas*) but the *kahal's* responsibility and authority within the membership was actually much broader.

- The *Kahal* perpetuated itself through elections, of varying honesty and exclusivity. The democratic ideals of including the poor or the uneducated had not made their morality felt in that era. Even in the latter days of the *kahal*, in the mid 19th century, being an elector meant that you were a person of importance in the *kahal*. The overseers of the *kahal* were variously titled *rosh* (headman), *parnas* (alderman), *neeman* (trustee), *gabbai* (supervisor), etc. You may note that there are many Jews today who still bear these titles as surnames. These surnames were chosen, generally in the 19th century to show pride for having the honor of being a Community official.

- The actions of this board of aldermen were recorded in *pinkasim* (often described as minutes but going beyond the simple record of meetings). *Pinkasim* recorded elections, expenditures, resolves, the membership in the Community and meetings of the *kahal* board as well as the transactions of the various organizations subordinate to the *kahal*. The secretary (*sofer*) of the *kahal* kept the minutes. These documents still exist for a few *kahals* and are wonderful historic records illustrating the motivations, machinery and methods of local Jewish existence. Their genealogical value is more spotty. There are, at times, lists of members of organizations (*chevroth*) for burial, for charity, for reading the Talmud and for various other jobs. They rarely concerned family relations.

- The *kahal* provided for the religion by building a synagogue and by approving the formation of other synagogues, and by hiring a chief rabbi for the Community. It also provided for a cantor (*chazzan*) sometimes called *sholiach tsibur* which was abbreviated to "shotz" – another surname source. Other synagogue functionaries included the sexton (*shammash*) as well as invited outside preachers (*maggidim*).

- Education was supported by the *kahals* by building religious schools providing primary (*cheder*) and advanced (*yeshiva*) education for boys and in later days also for girls. In sponsoring the various groups (*chevroth*) for study of literature and law, a study room (*beth ha-midrash*) for such activities was provided.

- A legal system was provided by recognizing the authority of Jewish Laws (*halakhoth*) and administering this justice through a court (*beth din*) and judges (*dayyanim*) who reported to the chief rabbi in his role

as chief justice (*av beth din*). To paraphrase George Gobel, a comedian of some note a few years back, this court made all of the little decisions - contracts, marriage, divorces, disputes, properties, questions of religious observance - while the Government made all the big decisions - should the Government, or should it not, go to war with Sweden?

- All life and death cycles were provided by the *kahals*. Cemetery (*beth olim*), burial society (*chevra kadisha*), hospital (*beth cholim*), visitors to the sick (*bikkurcholim*), homeless shelter (*hekdeish*), orphanage (*beth yetomim*), food, money, clothing and education for the poor (*talmud torah*) as well as provisions for dowlerless brides (*hakhnasat kallah*).

- The importance of small business was recognized by the establishment of loan societies (*gemilut chasidim*).

- A proper butcher (*shochet*) for kosher meats was provided.

- *Kahals* even decided what you could wear – meaning what was or was not a disgrace to the people ("shande far menshen").

- Rabbinic representation to broader districts of the Jewish Society was provided. There was a more-or-less hierarchal arrangement among the important rabbis, at times officially set up and recognized. Thus, a rabbi could be the chief rabbi for a district, a province or even an entire land. The legal decisions of a local rabbi could be appealed to higher authority within the Jewish society. The "supreme court" of Judaism was the Council of the Four Lands and the Council of Lithuania. This Council (or these Councils) met once every year or so in conjunction with one of the Jewish commercial fairs held in large centers like Brest, Litovsk or Lublin.

- Thus, the *kahal* was not only very powerful locally but it could represent interests across the whole of the Polish/Lithuanian Commonwealth (the largest country in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. It provided a basis for commercial access beyond the political borders of the local potentate, which not even a powerful local official could provide.

Nor was the power of the *kahal* only symbolic. The courts had the authority for punishments - fines, prohibitions, incarcerations and even excommunication – as well as favors - charity, awards, contracts, and licenses. In our time, it is hard to imagine an independent government of such significant powers overlaying the sovereign state. But, there it was. This represented the status of the Jewish Communities of the Polish/

Lithuanian Commonwealth for perhaps 200 years.

However, in the late 17th century and the entire 18th century, a variety of factors conspired to enervate and fragment the Polish/Lithuanian Commonwealth. Over the last half of the 18th century, it fell apart. Its central and northern parts were acquired by the Russian Empire. Lithuania, the classic enemy of the Muscovites, was thoroughly crumpled into a new set of political divisions, none of whose names included Lithuania. The Russian Empire accorded the dubious honor of naming to Poland by allowing one of its parts, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, to retain the name for a brief period as a political subdivision in the Empire.

One might imagine that in such times, there would be great pressures that might destroy the *kahal* system with its underlying political map being upset under it. And truly, the economic and political troubles of these times, often led to physical or political attacks on Jews and made the *kahal* an even more important source of cohesion, protection and sustenance for the Jewish population, strengthening it rather than weakening it. However, it led to an impoverished and embattled state for these Communities.

So just before the dawn of the new 19th century, the Jew-free Russian Empire suddenly found itself as sovereign to the largest Jewish society in the world. This was at a time when the martial songs of revolution were still being heard from France, which was creating a new empire under Napoleon, and the new United States of America was heard from afar as a whisper of a fearful fate for the Monarchies of old. At such time, the Russians were in no mood to antagonize this newly acquired Jewish population and bring forth its yearnings for political equality. With little forethought, they just continued to maintain the feudal arrangement of the Jewish corporation based on the *Kahals*.

At the same time, the autonomy afforded to Jews by the *Kahal* system continued to be opposed by the Christians and *petit-bourgeois* who were fearful and contemptuous of Jews and Judaism. They were joined now by a Russian sovereignty that was even more anti-semitic. This oppressive atmosphere worsened

with the war (Napoleon's campaign), subsequent peace and successive uprisings in the former Polish territories. The result was to weaken and abolish the *Kahals* as units with any functions other than punitive taxation, conscription and restriction.

The *Kahal*, in the Warsaw Government (a Russian province), was first officially abolished in 1821. The anti-semites inveighed against it continually through the 1830s, 1840s and in 1844 the Tsar abolished it again but for all the Russias. Nevertheless, it persisted mainly as a vehicle for oppression of the Jews rather than their protection. For example, in 1850 the *Kahal* elders were held personally responsible for capturing conscriptees and providing them to the Russian Army (for conversion and other training). If they failed in their quota they were themselves conscripted.

In 1834, the Tax Census (*Reviski Skaska*) was still accomplished by *Kahal* authorities and it was so stated on the census form. By the census of 1858, the census was divided into Jewish Communities (*obshchestvos*, a Russian word with the same meaning) but these still constituted much the same divisions. The *Kahal* was now attacked by Jew and Gentile alike, by the former for its oppressive conscription and taxation and by the latter because of its competition in both the religious and commercial fields. Jacob Brafman, a Jew who had escaped the Minsk *Kahal's* conscription, wrote a book accusing *Kahals* of an evil conspiracy to convert Christians and to take over the world. This was an early version of the Protocols of Zion that is the major literature in the Moslem world today. In 1866, his book was used as a basis for the Government's continuing repressive attitude towards the Jews. Thus, the evils and the past glories of the *Kahal* were well imprinted on the minds of our grandparents.

This is my story of the *Kahal* and what it might have meant to our ancestors. As with every story teller, I have a point of view: Jews are my heroes, albeit at times tragic. In fact, Brafman (the *no-goodnik*) used the *pinkas* of the Minsk *Kahal* for the first half of the 19th century as the basis for his book. ■

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For more information

For better, more complete and more astute tellers of this story see 1) The article on *Community* in the [Encyclopaedia Judaica](#). 2) *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* by Simon M. (I. Friedlander, tr.), The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, which is well indexed.

Examples of Kahal Records in Belarus Districts

■ Search Databases at Routes to Roots - Miriam Weiner:
<<http://www.rtrfoundation.org>>

For records and record sources try specific TOWN NAMES

■ Search <<http://www.jewishgen.org>> on keywords from the previous article. For example: *Chevre Kadisha*
<<http://www.jewishgen.org/jri-pl/lodzchev/lodzchevrakad.htm>>

Archive: National Historical Archives of Belarus in Grodno

Document Type: Grodno Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 18381874; 18741877

Fond/Opis/Delo: 1021; 146 (11 Books)

Document Type: Grodno Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 18741897; 18521910

Fond/Opis/Delo: 232 (14 Books)

Archive: Grodno Oblast Archives

Document Type: Grodno Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 1924 (Proceedings of the Grodno Jewish Community's Bureau for Vital Records) 19261936 (Jewish Religious Community Board of Directors); 19321934; 19361937 (List of the Grodno Jewish Community's Fee Payers with Indication of Their Address and Occupation)

Fond/Opis/Delo: 56/1/25; 56/1/98, 110, 120, 142, 154, 158; 56/1/98, 110, 120, 142, 154

Archive: Brest Oblast Archives

Document Type: Brest Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 19281939 (Jewish Religious Community Board of Directors); 19381939 (Jewish Bank Records)

Fond/Opis/Delo: 370/17; 601/

Archive Gomel Oblast Archives

Document Type: Gomel Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 19261934 (Jewish Court)

Fond/Opis/Delo: 707 (41 Books); 706

Archive: National Historical Archives of Belarus in Minsk

Document Type: Gomel Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 18531876

Fond/Opis/Delo: 2402

Document Type: Mogilev Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 18371915; 1889; 19161917

Fond/Opis/Delo: 2409 (129 Books); 3362

Document Type: Minsk Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 1774; 1811; 18171917

Fond/Opis/Delo: 332333 (226 Books); 1227; 330/1/336

Document Type: Vitebsk Kahal/Jewish Com

Year List: 1774; 18171886

Fond/Opis/Delo: 2606

Latvia SIG <<http://www.jewishgen.org/Latvia>>

by Arlene Beare

Latvia is a small country and, although in 1561 Poland took Livonia and Latgale, Kurland was an independent Duchy. As they were ruled by different people, the history of the Jews from then on was different in the three Provinces. Courland was never in the Pale of Settlement. Vidzeme (Riga) along with Courland was the nucleus of Latvian Jewry.

Courland.[Kurland] was West of the Dvina (Daugava) river.

Vidzeme (Livonia), including Riga is north of the Dvina (Daugava) River bordered north by Estonia and west by the Gulf of Riga.

Latgale is east of the Dvina (Daugava) . The three Latgalian districts Ludza (Lutsin), Rezekne (Rezhica) and Daugavpils (Dvinsk, Dunaburg). were, after 1802, Vitebsk province (gubernia). The first Independent Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918 and Jews were granted civil rights for the first time.

