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A Controversial Twist on the 'Four Sons'

March 18, 2010

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Jewish Exponent Feature

Many of us recall the use of Passover themes in such Jewish political activity as the "Freedom Seders" of the Jewish student movement of the 1960s or the "Let My People Go" campaigns by Soviet Jewry advocates in the 1970s and 1980s.

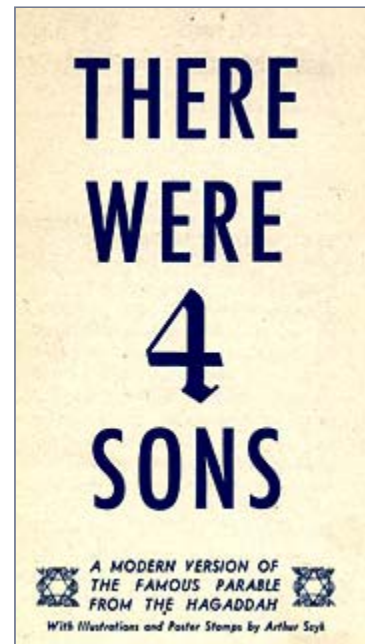
But the appearance of Passover imagery in contemporary Jewish politics goes back much farther than that. With Passover approaching in 1945, Zionist activists in the United States undertook an information offensive that utilized the holiday's themes to challenge the small but influential segment of the Jewish community that opposed Zionism.

Shortly before Passover, the Jewish activists known as the "Bergson Group" issued a pamphlet that retold the "four sons" portion of the Haggadah with a starkly modern twist.

The booklet, titled "There Were Four Sons," bore no author's name, but it had all the dramatic hallmarks of the Academy Award-winning screenwriter Ben Hecht, who was the most prominent of the Bergson Group's publicists. Hecht had previously authored a series of attention-grabbing, full-page newspaper ads for the group that stoked controversy by boldly criticizing Allied policy toward European Jewry.

"There Were Four Sons" was illustrated by the famed artist Arthur Szyk, who, in between drawing covers for Time and Collier's, and political cartoons for the New York Post, put his talents at the disposal of the Bergson Group.

Szyk's four sons are taken straight out of the debates then raging in the American Jewish community over the future of Palestine. The first three are different types of American Jews who opposed, or at least were uninterested in, the fight for a Jewish state.



The "wicked son" represents the wealthy, assimilated Jew who actively opposed Zionism. He asks: "What is this nonsense about a Jewish nation and an independent homeland? When all this fuss blows over, let them return to the countries they came from"

"Answer him," the pamphlet continues in the style of the traditional Haggadah, that "since he elects to hold himself aloof from a physical concern about his brother's plight, he has disqualified himself from a voice in the life-and-death affairs of a foreign and persecuted people." The Jews in Europe and Palestine fear his involvement in their affairs "more than the plotting of the anti-Semites," since "the adverse testimony of a supposed friend can be as scriptures in the mouth of the devil."



Szyk's depiction of the wicked son looks suspiciously like Joseph Proskauer, at the time the president of the American Jewish Committee, who was one of the most prominent and influential anti-Zionists of that era. Later, AJC would change its position and support the creation of Israel, but at that point, in 1945, it argued that the existence of a Jewish state would compromise the status of

Jews in the Diaspora.

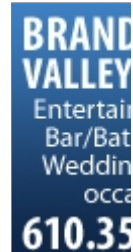
The second son, whom English-language Haggadahs typically call the "Simple Son," is here called the "Indifferent Son." He appears to be a middle-class businessman, wearing a fedora and chomping on a cigar. "Why don't we leave well enough alone?" he asks. "Aren't we doing OK here?" He worries that paying too much attention to European Jewry might "prod anti-Semitism here in America."

"Answer him," the Bergson pamphlet instructs, that fighting for a Jewish state would ultimately help decrease, not increase, anti-Semitism. Achieving "freedom and safety for your less fortunate kin in the death valley of Europe will create a sound moral foundation for a world order of peace and security," and that would include "banishing anti-Semitism."

Szyk's "Uninformed Son" (whom most Haggadahs call "the son who does not know to ask"), wearing a laborer's cap, is the stereotypical Jewish workingman. He says that he cannot understand why the Jews "complain" against the British administration in Palestine." After all, "Do Jews not have freedom there to live, work, sing, play and worship as they please?"

"Answer him that Palestine is far from a land of freedom today," the pamphlet asserts. "In Palestine, there are concentration camps" (meaning the detention camps where Jewish activists were held without charges), "torture chambers" (Jewish militants were often mistreated by their British captors), "ghettoes" (a reference to the curfews and other restrictions imposed on many Jewish neighborhoods) and "explicit anti-Jewish laws" (such as those prohibiting most Jewish immigration and land purchases).

The Bergson Group's "Wise Son" contrasts sharply with the other three. He is a Jewish soldier in the U.S. Army. He asks: "How can I help my fellow men in Europe and Palestine?" The pamphlet answers him by urging him to "join this crusade" for Jewish statehood "with all his heart and all his soul," and "add his voice, his influence among friends, and every penny he can honestly spare"



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The long dark night of Nazi persecution was drawing to a close, and the struggle for a Jewish state was about to begin in earnest. It was a struggle waged in Palestine with guerrilla warfare, on the high seas with refugee ships and in the court of public opinion with broadsides such as "There Were Four Sons," which invoked ancient imagery to sway hearts and minds.

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