Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History

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CHAPTER 11

THE SABBATIAN UPHEAVAL

I

NO PART OF Scholem’s voluminous scholarly works had a greater impact on modern Jewish historiography than his studies of the Sabbatian movement of the seventeenth century. Perhaps it was the unique, dramatic, and profound nature of the movement itself that interested so many.

A number of scholars followed Scholem in the study of the Sabbatian movement. While only a few of his students continued his work in the history of Hekhalot mysticism, early kabbalah, the Zohar and other subjects, his work on the Sabbatian movement is continued today by many historians in Israel and abroad. The advances in the study of this movement were very rapid; many new sources were revealed and published. 1 Sabbatianism in specific countries, areas, and towns was studied in many monographs. 2 The whole subject has acquired an importance for the understanding of Jewish history before and after the movement as well as during the centuries of its development and decline.
Historians of Judaism have a unique problem in adjusting European accepted chronological designations to Jewish history. When do the Middle Ages start and when is their conclusion? While most European scholars associate the beginning of the Middle Ages with the fall of the Roman Empire, this event had very little meaning for Jewish history, for few Jews lived at that time in the western Roman Empire, and the history of Byzantium and Persia—under whose rule most Jews lived—was little affected by the events of the year 476. Because of this, most Jewish historians begin the Middle Ages with the conquests of Islam in the beginning of the seventh century, conquests which united most of the Jewish world under the rule of Islam and opened a new chapter in the political and cultural history of Judaism.

Concerning the ending of the period of the Middle Ages much confusion existed. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 did not mean much to Jewish communities in the Netherlands or in Poland. The discovery of America in 1492 was very meaningful to Jewish history, but its impact was not felt for centuries. The Renaissance in Italy was meaningful to the culture of a small group of Jews in Italy and western Europe, while the majority in eastern Europe and the Near East were not affected by it at all. As for Jewish events, the most important was the expulsion from Spain, in 1492, but this also had an impact only on a part of Judaism and not on the nation as a whole.

Scholem’s view was that the beginning of the Sabbatian movement in 1665 and 1666 should be seen as the end of
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medieval Jewish history and the beginning of modern Jewish history. His main argument to support this view was that this event had important, meaningful, and permanent effects on every Jewish community throughout the world. Sabbatianism was, for him, the culmination of medieval Judaism and the point of departure for all major forces which shaped modern Jewish history, including Hasidism and Enlightenment, messianism and the participation of the Jews in European culture. Scholem saw the Sabbatian movement as a key to the development of Jewish society, culture, and beliefs in modern times.

III

The relationship between the two dominant figures in the beginning of the Sabbatian movement, Sabbatai Zevi himself and his prophet, Nathan of Gaza, was studied in detail by Scholem, who reached the conclusion that the success of the movement and its spread in the early phases of its history depended more on the prophet than on the messiah. Sabbatai Zevi himself was in his early forties when the movement began. His messianic pretensions were well known in several Jewish communities in Eretz Israel and Turkey and he was regarded by those who heard his messianic claims as an unbalanced scholar, sometimes tolerated but driven out when patience with his strange behavior was exhausted. Scholem came to the conclusion that Sabbatai Zevi was manic-depressive. This was expressed by his transition, every few months, from a state of extreme self-confidence and certainty of his
supernatural powers and status to a state of melancholy and depression. A handsome man and a good singer, on first meetings he used to impress people, until they became familiar with his strange delusions.

The Jews of the seventeenth century were used to messianic pretenders; the appearance of Sabbatai Zevi himself did not create any noticeable stir, and certainly the beginning of the movement cannot be attributed to anything he did. The event that occurred in 1665 was the sudden revelation of the prophet Nathan in Gaza.

Pretenders to prophecy can be found in Jewish history in the Middle Ages, though not many. Nathan of Gaza was unique: he came from Eretz Israel. The Talmudic sources emphasize that prophecy is impossible anywhere but in Israel, and they did their best to explain, for instance, that Ezekiel prophesied in the temple in Jerusalem, and only revealed his prophecies on the river Kvar in Babylonia. There is no precedent for the appearance of a prophet in Israel since biblical times, and the impact of Nathan’s appearance was great.

Nathan did not only declare that he had seen visions portraying Sabbatai Zevi as the messiah. He also created a literature, some of it pseudepigraphic. These were works of antiquity which he claimed to have discovered which described the arrival of the messiah in the form of Sabbatai Zevi. Nathan wrote many letters announcing the arrival of the messianic age, and used most skillfully the network of communications which existed then between synagogues and communities to spread the message of the messiah’s arrival far and wide. In only a very few months Nathan’s messages spread around most of the Jewish world.
The nature of the connection between the messiah and his prophet is not completely understood. What was it in Sabbatai Zevi’s personality which so attracted and fascinated the young scholar in Gaza? What made the young kabbalist, who undoubtedly had also worldly and practical talents, decide to dedicate everything to preaching the messianic message of Sabbatai Zevi?

Nathan wanted to create a unity between the dominant theology of the time, the Lurianic kabbalah, in which he was a well-versed and creative adherent; the ancient Jewish messianic myth, as presented, for instance, in the *Sefer Zerubavel*, the early medieval apocalypse describing in detail the appearance of the messiah and his endeavors, which was a most popular work; and Sabbatai Zevi himself. Nathan set out to show that all these three elements were one and the same, that Lurianic myth and messianic myth carried the same message in different terminology, and that the individual characteristics of Sabbatai Zevi were the embodiment of both of them.

The early Sabbatian movement met with great success. The old messianic myth described the messiah as wandering between the lowly state of a beggar at the gates of Rome, dressing his terrible wounds, and one of a great leader of Israel, the beloved representative of God. His career, according to that old apocalypse, included terrible defeats as well as great victories. Nathan could show that these dramatic changes in the messiah’s status were the allegorical expressions of the moods of Sabbatai Zevi, the manic-depressive. All the prophecies concerning the appearance of the messiah and his sufferings were present in the mannerisms of Sabbatai Zevi.9
Nathan created a unity between his messiah and Lurianic theology. Lurianic mythology did not contain a specific role for the personal messiah before the process of the tikkun was achieved; the messiah was to appear as the result of the successful struggle of the whole Jewish people to uplift the sparks and return them to their rightful place in the divine realm, depriving evil of its sustenance and thus achieving its abolishment. There is no place in this theology for any form of leadership, and no specific duties for the messiah. This created a most heavy burden on the shoulders of every individual Jew; his every misdeed could delay the redemption, and the fate of the whole world, of the divine world, rested on his ethical and ritualistic behavior.

The Lurianic system was the product, and the way of life, of a selected, pioneering group of scholars in Safed, who settled in that community because of their deep commitment to the kabbalah and to messianic expectations. It was far less suitable for the normal social structure of other Jewish communities.

Nathan's messianic theology is based on complete, unqualified acceptance of the Lurianic myth. He used its terminology and his works are developments of Lurianism. But Nathan introduced one major change into the Lurianic picture: a realm within the structure of evil, the deepest and most difficult part, described as the "heels" of the evil "Shiur Komah," which cannot be changed by the usual worship of every Jew. Thus overcoming evil cannot be completed by the people alone; direct divine intervention is also needed. That intervention, according to Nathan, is provided by the messiah, who is an incarnation of a divine power (the sixth sefi-
rah, tiferet). Sabbatai Zevi, said Nathan, appeared in order to make the completion of the process of Lurianic tik'kun possible by fighting and overcoming the "heels" of the world of impurity and evil.

To uplift the divine sparks kept in darkest captivity in that sphere within the Satanic world, Sabbatai Zevi had to descend into the depth of evil, fight it, free the sparks and then lift them up to their original place in the divine world. The prophesied and actual changes of the state and the mood of the messiah are the result of this necessary process. When the messiah is fighting evil at its core, his external melancholy is the result; when he approaches the divine world with the redeemed sparks he is exalted, happy, in a state of enlightenment. Thus all parts of the picture come together, each supporting the other and serving as a proof to the veracity of the others. That Sabbatai Zevi was obviously the savior described by ancient messianic apocalyptic works, and Lurianic theology, as interpreted by Nathan, is the explanation why a messiah is necessary and how he enhances redemption.

IV

The rapid spread of the Sabbatian movement, which in less than a year engulfed the whole Jewish world, in the east and in the west, without almost any voice of opposition, puzzled nineteenth-century Jewish historians. They were somewhat embarrassed by the phenomenon of the departure of a whole people from rational thinking, or so it seemed, and they sought various explanations, some of them crudely denying the known
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facts. For instance, some connected the spread of Sabbatianism with the upheavals and massacres of the Jews in Poland and in the Ukraine in 1648 to 1649 (gezerot tach). The Chmelnitzki massacres served as an explanation for the dramatic eruption of Jewish messianism a decade and a half later.

Scholem studied this problem and concluded that no such explanation could be supported by the historical facts. Rather, the Sabbatian movement grew and was strongest in communities, especially those in Turkey, which were remote from events in eastern Europe and where information concerning the massacres was scant. In contrast, the Jewish communities in Poland were among the last to accept Nathan's messages and were the least impressed by them.10 Nothing in the history and development of the Sabbatian movement shows any connection to the upheavals in Poland and the Ukraine. Scholem regarded the theory that messianism was the direct result, and refuge, of Jews during periods of extreme hardship as false. Messianism often flourished where Jews lived relatively in a secure and prosperous state (like the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century), and often was completely absent when Jews were persecuted in the worst fashion.11 Nineteenth-century historians often tried to connect messianism with suffering as an apology to excuse the Jews for their "irrational" behavior, refusing to admit that messianism, in various degrees, was a constant creative power within Jewish religion and culture.

Another attempt to explain the spread of Sabbatianism was made in this century by scholars who tried to find a social and economic background to the movement. According to them, Sabbatianism arose from the rebellion of the Jewish
lower masses against the social and economic leadership; that is, messianism was but a cover to intense social struggles.\textsuperscript{12} As Scholem proved, the facts completely deny this explanation. The participation of the prosperous in the Sabbatian movement was no less than that of the poor. Never did Sabbatianism assume characteristics of a populist movement, and it did not contain any elements of a class struggle. Sabbatianism was the direct result of the development of Jewish mysticism in the previous century.

Scholem emphasized the role of the Lurianic kabbalah in the spread of Sabbatianism.\textsuperscript{13} That the Jewish world was united at that time around the symbolism and the terminology of the Lurianic teachings is important to understanding the rapid spread and ready acceptance of Nathan of Gaza's prophecy. Luria described the imminence of the redemption, and his myth strengthened the existing beliefs that the messiah was about to appear at any moment. The Jews were ready to accept a messianic message, especially if it was expressed in Lurianic symbolism and delivered by a prophet from Eretz Israel. That Nathan employed so many other motifs from ancient Jewish sources, especially the messianic myth of the \textit{Book of Zerubavel} and other ancient apocalyptic works, facilitated the spread of his teachings. The close contacts that existed at that time through networks of communities, synagogues, traveling preachers, and the exchange of letters made his task easier, and he skillfully employed all these means. Thus, by the end of the next year, 1666, the whole Jewish world was awaiting the imminent redemption, which Nathan said was about to start within a few months. Almost everybody believed Sabbatai Zevi was going to remove the crown
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of the sultan of the Ottoman Empire, crown himself, and lead the Jewish people wherever they were to the land of Israel. He would rebuild the temple and messianic times would start. He even allotted the governorships of various parts of the country to his friends, whom he described as representatives of the twelve tribes.

V

Sabbatai Zevi did indeed meet the Ottoman emperor, who investigated the excitement and turmoil among his Jewish subjects. But instead of lifting the emperor’s crown Sabbatai Zevi came out of that meeting wearing the Moslem turban, signifying that he had converted to Islam. Thus began the deepest spiritual crisis of modern Judaism. But according to Scholem, Sabbatai Zevi’s conversion to Islam was not the end of the Sabbatian movement but rather its beginning. Before the conversion, Sabbatianism was just an awakening of messianic hope, expressed in the most traditional fashion of repentance (Nathan’s most popular work of that period was a series of instructions on how to perform repentance) and devotion to traditional worship. There was nothing that marked it as an innovative power within Jewish society. Only when Judaism was suddenly faced with an impossible and paradoxical situation did the spiritual power unleashed by Nathan and Sabbatai Zevi create a new movement, a new theology, and a new phase in Jewish history.

Previous historians described the Sabbatians after the conversion as “remnants” of the destroyed movement. These
remnants, Scholem pointed out, existed throughout the seventeenth century. Major movements of the eighteenth century were influenced by Sabbatians, who included some of the greatest leaders of eighteenth-century Judaism. Some echoes of Sabbatian groups are found in nineteenth-century European Judaism, and a Sabbatian-Moslem sect, the Dönmeh, probably exists in Turkey today.

Had Sabbatianism been destroyed in 1666, it could not continue to exert such profound influence on the minds of diverse Jewish communities for 200 years, insisted Scholem. We must analyze what happened in 1666 and subsequent years in order to understand the power and fascination that Sabbatianism had for so many years for so many people, many of them among the most prominent and best educated in Jewish society.

Scholem explained that religion is not necessarily the realm of the rational. Paradoxes do not destroy religions; sometimes they build them. The paradox of the suffering righteous is not destructive to religious belief; to the contrary, it is the power that upholds faith in the hereafter. The paradox of the crucified messiah did not destroy nascent Christianity but built it. In the same way, the paradox of the converted messiah is the spiritual source of the development of the Sabbatian movement after 1666. Historians must study carefully the ways that the Sabbatian believers struggled with the conversion of the messiah in order to perceive the sources of the powers which the belief in Sabbatai Zevi obviously held for such large sections of Judaism for so long a time.16

The crisis, Scholem explained, was the result of the clear contradiction between external appearances and internal faith
in the hearts of the Jews. Externally, nothing had changed. The world continued to be ruled by the gentile powers as it had been before; Israel was oppressed as it had been before. Even the messiah had converted to Islam. Nevertheless, internal faith held that the redemption was imminent and that Lurianic theology and apocalyptic myth denoted that Sabbatai Zevi was the messiah who would deliver Israel and return the Jews to their homeland. The problem with which the conversion presented Judaism was whether to believe the external appearances, or to follow the faith in the prophecy of Nathan of Gaza, of Luria, and of Zerubavel.

It should not be surprising, wrote Scholem, that so many Jews preferred to adhere to inner convictions than to external appearances. The insistence of Lurianic theology upon parallel symbolic connections between heaven and earth, between the divine world and the material one, made Jews regard earthly events as remote symbols of divine processes. The difference between Nathan's prophecy of redemption and the unchanged state of the material world only proved that the changes in the divine realm were not yet transformed into their material symbols; the divine causes existed, while the earthly effects did not. One should not throw away the ancient traditions of Judaism as presented by Luria and the other sources, included in Nathan's prophecy, because of the delay in the apparent (and therefore less important than the hidden) phenomena of the redemption.

The crucial point was, of course, the explanation of the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi. For generations Jews were educated in the belief that there could be no worse crime for a Jew than to convert to another religion. The whole concept
of *kiddush ha-shem* expressed the martyrological belief that it was better to sacrifice one's life than to yield to conversion. And now, so it seemed, the messiah himself committed the worst possible transgression, forsaking the opportunity of martyrdom and yielding, without a struggle, to the emperor's demand of his conversion. This was a paradox that was the source of a diverse range of explanations.

The most basic explanation which was accepted by all Sabbatians was that the conversion was necessary in order to enable Sabbatai Zevi to penetrate into the depth of the realm of evil in order to free the sparks imprisoned there. He had to assume the garb of the evil powers themselves so that he could gain access into their dominions. His conversion was nothing but a pretense, so that he could destroy evil from within. Sabbatian literature often uses the picture of the tree of the evil powers which is being eaten from within by the messiah like worms eating the interior of a tree. The outside appearance of the tree is not changed. It seems to be strong and blooming, but it is empty within and will crumble at the slightest touch. Other metaphors include the motifs of the necessity of waste and rot before a new blooming is possible. All served to explain that the messiah had to be identified externally with evil in order to achieve its destruction, which was his divine mission.¹⁷

We find in Sabbatian literature other, more politically oriented explanations, like the claim that in order to overcome the worst evil element in the world, which was Christianity, a coalition had to be devised between Islam and Judaism. This coalition to overcome, in the first stage, the common enemy, is symbolized by the messiah's conversion to Islam.
Another subtle but important reason given by the Sabbatians for Sabbatai Zevi's conversion is one related to the traumatic Jewish experience of the marranos in Spain and Portugal. The reports of the Inquisition's horrors made a deep impression on Jews, and in the seventeenth century many families and individuals whose forefathers had converted to Christianity two centuries before fled from Spain and Portugal and returned to Judaism in Holland, Italy, and other countries. Many of these were well educated, and they were readily integrated into Jewish intellectual society. One of these was Rabbi Michael Abraham Cardozo, who fled from Spain, who became one of the greatest theologians of the Sabbatian movement, second only to Nathan of Gaza. According to Cardozo, Sabbatai Zevi had to convert in order to identify with the sufferings of the marranos. He had to become a marrano himself, a Jew who keeps his Jewish devotion a secret while pretending to be something else. There is a deep religious meaning to the frightful experience of the marranos, and the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi is a retroactive identification with their sufferings. Not many of the Sabbatians believed this, but it had an impact on the formulation of Sabbatian beliefs and ways of life in subsequent years.

VI

Sabbatianism sprang from the paradox of a converted messiah, as Christianity had sprung from the paradox of a crucified messiah. But, Scholem pointed out, there is a great difference between these two paradoxes. There are many
constructive human values which can be derived from the Christian messiah, especially those of devotion and martyrdom. But what was to be done with the Sabbatian messiah, the cowardly sinner, who betrayed the tradition of thousands of Jewish martyrs who chose the opposite way in a similar situation?

One obvious thing to do was to follow Sabbatai Zevi, in *imitatio dei* and convert to Islam. A few of his followers indeed did that immediately after his conversion, and a group of several thousands was converted two decades later to create the Jewish-Moslem sect of the Dönmehs.

But most remained within Judaism and practiced their Sabbatian beliefs within the framework of Jewish society. The basic ideas and symbols which provided them with a theology and justification for their behavior were developed by Nathan of Gaza. The key symbol was that of the *torah de-azilut*.

While exile continues and history has not reached the stage of redemption, a Jew must follow the commandments of the Torah and the Talmud, as presented by the halachic authorities. But what will happen in messianic times? Will the Torah remain unchanged? Most Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages insisted that it would never be changed, most emphatically Maimonides, who viewed Christianity as the result of the belief that the appearance of the messiah signifies a new Torah, in which most of the earlier prohibitions are lifted. He categorically stated that the messiah will not change one word in the Torah. He will be recognized by the fact that he will teach the Torah to all Israel, making them repent their sins and creating a Jewish community which will be
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completely governed by the laws of the Torah as given to Moses on Mount Sinai for all eternity.21

One of the few examples of a different way of thought is found in the early kabbalistic work *Sefer ha-Temunah* (*The Book of the Picture*) (of the letters of the alphabet and of the Deity). In this work, the author presents a system according to which God creates a succession of worlds, each replacing the previous one after its ending and destruction, and each world governed by one of the *sefirot*.22 The Torah of each world is a version of a "basic" Torah, according to the characteristics of that *sefirah*. The world in which we live is undoubtedly governed by the fifth *sefirah*, *din*, which is the power of law and justice. Because of this our Torah is constructed of exact rulings concerning what to do and what not to do. The next world, governed by the sixth *sefirah*, *tiferet*, which is the power of mercy and compassion, will have a Torah reflecting these values.

Nathan of Gaza followed the ideas of the ancient kabbalist who wrote the *Sefer ha-Temunah*, in a spirit very similar to that of Joachim of Fiore. The Torah given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai was not the perfect Torah, the truly divine one. It was the *torah de-beriah*, "the Torah of creation," according to the kabbalistic system of the succession of worlds, the one just below the divine *sefirot*. The Torah of messianic times is the truly divine Torah derived from the world of emanation, *torah de-azilut*. The coming of the messiah signifies the transition from one Torah to another. This is why Sabbatai Zevi behaved as if he were not bound by the laws of the traditional Torah, which was not his; his strange actions
were the results of his living by the laws of the supreme, spiritual, and divine Torah of the redemption, the one to be revealed when the Lurianic *tikkun* is completed.

This idea opened the gates for antinomian tendencies within Sabbatian thought and practice, because the new messianic Torah is one in which many of the older prohibitions are lifted and spiritual, rather than ritualistic, ways of worship are expected. The Sabbatians differed considerably from each other in their understanding of the laws of the *torah de-azilut*.

The main answer that Nathan of Gaza gave the Sabbatians was how to follow Sabbatai Zevi into conversion, imitating his state. According to this belief, a Jew does not have to convert to another religion, Islam or Christianity, to imitate Sabbatai Zevi and become a “marrano”; he can do it within Judaism, by pretending to believe in the old, traditional Torah, while inwardly believing in the true Torah, the current one, the messianic Sabbatian one. In this way one can be a “convert” or a marrano within traditional Judaism, pretending to believe in its norms and commandments, and secretly follow the new messianic revelation of Sabbatai Zevi and Nathan of Gaza. Scholem characterized this attitude as one of “holy hypocrisy.” It does not matter in which religion or society one lives as long as one behaves hypocritically, pretending to believe in one thing while believing another.

How does one follow the *torah de-azilut*? What does one actually do to express one’s disbelief in old traditional values and one’s adherence to the messianic Torah? The answers that Sabbatians gave included a whole range of religious possibilities. One could espouse the completely antinomianistic claim that the spiritual Torah is the direct opposite of the old one,
and everything prohibited in the old is a commandment in the new—"the negation of torah is its upholding," or one could adhere strictly to the old Torah with only minor variations.

The symbolic nature of both Lurianic and Sabbatian mysticism naturally enabled many Sabbatians to employ symbolic means to express their faith in the new Torah. One of the most frequent was the celebration of the ninth day of the month of Av, the day in which the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, a traditional day of mourning and fasting, which was also regarded as the messiah's birthday. (Indeed Sabbatai Zevi was born then.) While all other Jews fasted and wept, the Sabbatian would secretly celebrate the messiah's birthday, thereby signifying his freedom from the old commandments and his faith in the messiah. These celebrations need not be public or elaborate. Sometimes it would suffice just to eat a bite of fruit, giving only a symbolic expression to the faith in Sabbatai Zevi. The hypocrisy, the duplicity were the important elements, not the hedonistic pleasures. Thus some Sabbatians would express the freedom that the torah de-azilut gave by eating a piece of lard, prohibited in the Torah but symbolically practiced by Sabbatai Zevi himself.

Some Sabbatians, especially in the eighteenth century, went even further to explain Sabbatai Zevi's conversion. He had to convert because of the enormous strength of the powers of evil which he set out to vanquish. The redemption thus was delayed, even for many years after Sabbatai Zevi's death, because of the struggle that is going on and the stiff resistance of Satan. The duty of the faithful in these circumstances is to support the messiah with all their strength. This support can
be given only through the old Torah, which, according to Luria, includes the laws which symbolically bring about the tikkun of the divine world. The faithful have, therefore, to observe strictly all the commandments and ethical demands of the traditional Torah, in order to uplift as many sparks as possible and make the messiah's struggle against evil somewhat easier. These Sabbatians were the most devout and strict observers of the Torah, often called hasidim, "pious." Paradoxically, to find the Sabbatians in an eighteenth-century Jewish community one would seek the most pious, strict observers of Jewish traditional laws, customs, and ethical demands.

Two practices were common for all Sabbatian followers of the messianic Torah to observe. One was duplicity; they kept their messianic faith in Sabbatai Zevi a secret, thus creating the false impression that Sabbatianism vanished or considerably diminished after the conversion. It did not vanish, it voluntarily went underground in order to fulfill their concept of imitatio dei. The second was honesty; they expressed their belief in a new Torah which would free them from the old traditional requirements even if in practice they still followed diligently all its commandments. The freedom was not an external physical one, but an inner spiritual freedom that only few of the Sabbatians expressed openly by antinomianistic behavior. This sense of freedom, however, had a profound impact upon Jewish behavior when Jews faced European culture as the time of emancipation approached.

VII

The Frankist movement of the middle of the eighteenth century was the most extreme expression of Sabbatianism. It
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had an impact upon later Jewish history. Jacob Frank was a Sabbatian from Poland who followed a Turkish Jew, Baruchya, who claimed to be the incarnation of Sabbatai Zevi. When Frank returned to Poland (after Baruchya's death), he himself claimed to be the continuation of that line and to be the current (and final) incarnation of the messiah. Around him gathered a few thousands of Jews, who believed in his messianic role. However, rumors spread among the Jewish communities that the Frankists were promiscuous, performed orgies, required incest and the exchange of wives and other crimes. Rabbis gathered to denounce them, to declare them out of bounds of Jewish communities, and even to "allow their blood," meaning that killing them did not constitute a religious crime. Outcast from Judaism, the Frankists sought the assistance of the Catholic church in Poland. The Church was agreeable because it saw this as an opportunity to start the large-scale conversion of a number of Jews to Christianity. The Frankists insisted on their conversion as a separate group, keeping their own identity, their own community, their books, and even their beards. The Church agreed but demanded that they face the Jews in a religious dispute to convince other Jews that conversion to Christianity was the right way.

Two such disputations were held, one in Kaminietz in 1757 and the other in Lvov in 1760; and after the second the Frankists were allowed to be converted. A unique and traumatic event marked this dispute: The Frankists supported the Christian claim that the Talmud required Jews to use the blood of Christian infants for religious purposes. This is the only time in Jewish history that people who were technically Jews supported, in public, the blood libel, thus claiming
that the Jewish people were ritual murderers. It is said that Jacob Frank told the rabbis: "You wanted blood, I gave you blood."

This fate of a large group of Jews, who put the blood libel on their brothers and converted to Christianity, was a most traumatic event for rabbinic Judaism. It showed that there was no limit to the evil consequences of Sabbatianism. From then on, Jewish rabbis insisted on the strictest adherence to every detail of the traditional commandments and opposed every innovative idea as dangerous. The reaction to the Frankist trauma also contributed to the vehement opposition of many rabbis to Hasidism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to Zionist activity at the end of the previous century and the present one. Even the wish to come to the land of Israel was suspicious, for there had been several immigrations of Sabbatian believers from Europe to Eretz Israel, inspired by Sabbatian messianic expectations.27

The teachings of Jacob Frank also were used by some sectarianists to explain their destructive tendencies. They interpreted Frank to say that what hinders redemption is the actual existence of the present world. The new, spiritual, and free stage of historical existence cannot be reached until the previous one is destroyed. As the true way to follow the old traditional Torah is to destroy it, so the true way to build a new world of freedom is to destroy the old one.

VIII

There is no doubt that the Frankist movement was a traumatic one for Judaism, but another one was no less upsetting.
This was the controversy concerning the Sabbatianism of Rabbi Jonathan Eibschutz, the great scholar, preacher, and rabbi of Prague in the eighteenth century.

When Sabbatianism went underground and its adherents practiced their belief in secret, a group of Jewish rabbis, scattered in many countries, made it their business to expose and denounce them, especially if they acquired positions of leadership and influence in Jewish communities. One of the most prominent among these was an important kabbalist and writer, Rabbi Jacob Emden,\(^{28}\) whose father was a very well known and influential halachist.

Rabbi Jacob Emden was an arrogant, aggressive person. He believed that he was persecuted because of his zeal in exposing Sabbatians, but he had a very keen sense of what Sabbatianism was and how its believers behaved. He published many accusations against many different people, and in most cases historical study seems to uphold his accusations as based on fact. None of these attracted so much attention and created such a deep controversy as his claim that Rabbi Jonathan Eibschutz was a secret believer of Sabbatai Zevi and his messianism.

The basis for Emden's argument was a handful of amulets written and given by Rabbi Jonathan to members of his community, as was the custom at that time. Rabbi Jacob Emden analyzed these amulets and came to the conclusion that they included holy names that were computations of the name of Sabbatai Zevi, presented as a divine power. Eibschutz categorically denied these accusations, but Emden published the content of the amulets and the proofs were quite convincing. Emden also claimed that a clearly Sabbatian book by the name
The conflict divided East European Jewry into two factions, the supporters and the opponents of Rabbi Jonathan. Each side produced pamphlets and books to prove its case. Those defending Sabbatianism attacked Emden's character severely and claimed that his accusations were the result of personal jealousy and hatred of the successful Rabbi Jonathan. The controversy became very bitter and acrimonious, and continued for many years. Scholem studied this matter and seemed to prove conclusively that Rabbi Jonathan was indeed a believer in Sabbatai Zevi and the author of the Sabbatian book.

When Scholem published his conclusions concerning this controversy he was attacked by traditional rabbis in Jerusalem in the most vehement manner. Some used this opportunity to attack his scholarly work as a whole, and his personality and erudition came under fire. His book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* contained scores of statements that could arouse opposition and anger among orthodox rabbis, but neither his conclusion that Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai did not write the *Zohar*, nor his description of the *Hekhalot* literature of Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael as gnostic in character invoked such anger. Scholem's support of the accusations against Rabbi Jonathan Eibschutz represented the one thing that the orthodox rabbis of Jerusalem could not tolerate.

Why such anger concerning this matter among so many for such a long time? It seems that what was, and is, at issue, is traditional Jewish education. It is possible, or even imaginable, that a person who was educated in the most tradi-
tional way, who studied the Talmud for many years and understands it well, somebody who knows the most minute details of Jewish law and is declared a rabbi who can teach and instruct in the halakha, a person who preaches in the synagogue and serves as his community's guide in ethical matters could entertain the idea that Sabbatai Zevi was the messiah? This was and is unthinkable and unacceptable to orthodox Judaism. The deep conviction of the intrinsic purifying power of the Torah—meaning, practically, the systematic study of the Talmud in the traditional manner—is one of the deepest convictions of traditional Judaism, and following the example of Rabbi Jonathan Eibschutz could shatter it.

Even today, books are written to prove how impossible Rabbi Jacob Emden's charges were, and how close his intellectual world was to that of Rabbi Jonathan. The trauma has not passed, for it affected one of the most basic foundations of traditional Judaism. For Scholem, this was one more example of the deep changes imposed on Judaism by the Sabbatian movement.

NOTES

1. In his essay “Redemption Through Sin” (Gershom Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism [New York: Schocken, 1971] pp. 70–80) Scholem stated that almost no original sources from the Sabbatian movement remained after having been systematically destroyed in years following the rise of the movement. This proved to be untrue. Scholem himself was amazed in later years by the wealth of historical, literary, and theological material which survived and which was utilized by him and others in order to describe the movement. It seems that scholarly neglect, even more than systematic destruction, was responsible for ignorance concerning Sabbatianism until Scholem began his investigations.
2. For the most recent bibliography of scholarship on Sabbatianism, see Scholem’s encyclopedia article on the movement reprinted in G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 244–86.


6. The fact that Ezekiel was a priest was used to strengthen this view.

7. Some of the texts were published by Scholem in *Be-'Iqvit Mashiah* (Jerusalem: Sifrei Tarshish, 1944).

8. An important anthology of Nathan’s letters is found in an anti-Sabbatian work by Ya’akov Saporta, *Tzitzat Novel Zevi*. A critical edition of the work, with a detailed introduction, was published by I. Tishby (Jerusalem, 1954).


12. The most important exponent of this view was the late Marxist historian Rudolph Mahler. See his *History of the Jewish People in Modern Times* [Hebrew], vol. 1, 4 parts (1952–62); vol. 2, 3 parts (1970–80).

13. Scholem saw the relationship between Lurianism and Sabbatianism as a crucial one: it stands in the center of all his studies regarding the rapid spread of Sabbatian ideas and their historical impact. See G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, p. 15ff.

14. The detailed description of this meeting was given by Scholem in *Sabbatai Sevi*, pp. 668–86.

15. Nathan’s orthodox demands concerning repentance are found in several manuscripts. The text was published by Tishby in *Netivei 'Emunah u-Minhut*, pp. 30–51.

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16. The power of paradox as a creative force in religion is expressed in the motto which Scholem chose for Sabbatai Sevi—The Mystical Messiah: “Paradox is a characteristic of truth. What communis opinio has of truth is surely no more than an elementary deposit of generalizing partial understanding, related to truth even as sulphurous fumes are to lightning” (from the correspondence of Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg and Wilhelm Dilthey).


18. The biography of Isaac Cardozo was studied in detail by Y. Yerushalmi, From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto; Isaac Cadoso: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). Yerushalmi dealt with the relationship between the two brothers, and their exchange of letters concerning Sabbatianism. It seems that Isaac Cardozo saw in his brother’s messianic belief a product of their common Catholic education in Spain before their emigration and return to Judaism.


20. Nathan’s theology after the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi was discussed by Wirszubski; for reference, see above, n. 17.


23. Scholem’s most recent exposition of the study of the Frankist movement, including a detailed bibliography, is to be found in his encyclopedia article reprinted in G. Scholem, Kabbalah, pp. 287–305.


25. The Frankist movement relied on a talmudic saying which seems to imply that the messiah will not come until all the souls created by God have had the chance to enter bodies and come into the world [cf. 311]
Yevamot 62a]. If so, then the more children that are born, the closer is the redemption.

26. The documents concerning these disputations were published and studied by M. Balaban in *The History of the Frankist Movement* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Davir, 1934–35), pp. 137–51, 209–24.

27. The most important Sabbatian emigration to the land of Israel was that led by R. Yehuda he-Hasid (no connection to the thirteenth-century sage of the Ashkenazi Hasidim) and R. Hayyim Malakh (“the angel”) in 1700. Most of the immigrants who came to Jerusalem, including R. Yehudah, died soon after their arrival in a plague and left an unfinished synagogue (the “hurva,” ruin, of R. Yehudah in the old city, Jerusalem). Hayyim Malakh returned to Poland and continued his Sabbatian activity. See G. Scholem, “The Sabbatian Movement in Poland,” pp. 48–64.


30. The most noteworthy example was that of Reuven Margaliot in his pamphlet “The Cause of R. Jacob Emden’s Opposition to R. Jonathan Eibeschutz” [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1941). This critique prompted Scholem to respond with his one little pamphlet entitled *Leqet Marqaliot* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1941), i.e. “a collection of pearls,” an obvious play on words with his critic’s name.