

Medieval Israel Class #8: The Messianists: The Shabbetai Tzvi Crisis

Timeline

- 1492 Jews expelled from Spain
- 1517 Ottoman conquest of the land of Israel
- 1569-1572 ARI in Tzfat
- 1626 Shabbatai Zevi born in Smyrna/Izmir
- 1644 Nathan Ashkenazi (Nathan of Gaza) born in Jerusalem
- 1648 Chmelnitzki massacres in the Ukraine (ט"ו גזירות תחנת ותנ"ה)
- 1658 Rabbi Yaakov Hagiz opens the Bet Yaakov (Viga) yeshiva in Jerusalem
- 1665 Shabbatai Tzvi visits Nathan, begins his messianic journey
- Late 1665 Imprisoned in Istanbul
- September 1666 Converts to Islam
- 1676 Shabbatai Tzvi dies in the Balkans
- 1680 Nathan dies in Macedonia
- 1700 Rabbi Judah the Hasid arrives in Jerusalem with his followers
- 1721 Hurva synagogue destroyed for the first time
- 1815 Aliya of students of the Vilna Gaon to Jerusalem
- 1837 Hurva rebuilt by students of the Vilna Gaon

Tragedy in Eastern Europe

"many communities beyond the Dnieper, and close to the battle field, such as Pereyaslaw, Baryszowka, Piratyn, and Boryspole, Lubin and Lachowce and their neighbors, who were unable to escape, perished for the sanctification of His Name. These persons died cruel and bitter deaths. Some were skinned alive and their flesh was thrown to the dogs; some had their hands and limbs chopped off, and their bodies thrown on the highway only to be trampled by wagons and crushed by horses; some had wounds inflicted upon them, and thrown on the street to die a slow death; they writhed in their blood until they breathed their last;

others were buried alive. . . There was no cruel device of murder in the whole world that was not perpetrated by the enemies."

— Nathan Neta Hanover, "The Abyss of Despair (Yeven Metzulah)", chapter IV

Messianic Hopes and Computations

"the opinions of many Christians and mine do concur herein, that we both believe that the restoring time of our Nation into their native country is very near at hand" (Manasseh Ben Israel in his letter to Oliver Cromwell, 1650s)

Gershom Scholem (1897 -1982)

Superstition is nonsense, but the study of superstition is scholarship.' (attributed to Professor Saul Lieberman)

Nathan Ashkenazi AKA Nathan of Gaza

When I had attained the age of 20, I began to study the Zohar and the Lurianic writings. [According to the Talmud] whoever wants to purify himself receives the aid of Heaven; and thus He sent me some of His holy angels and blessed spirits, who revealed many mysteries of the Torah to me. That same year, energized by the visions of the angels and the blessed souls, I was engaged in a prolonged fast during the week before the feast of Purim. I locked myself in a room in holiness and purity, and as I tearfully recited the penitential prayers of the morning service, the spirit came over me. My hair stood on end, and my knees shook. And I beheld the merkava [divine chariot], and I saw visions of God all day long and all night. I was vouchsafed true prophecy like any other prophet, as the voice spoke to me, beginning with the words "Thus speaks the Lord." With utmost clarity my heart perceived toward whom my prophecy was directed... and only then did the angel permit me to proclaim what I had seen. I recognized that he was [the] true [Messiah].... And indeed the angel that revealed himself to me in my waking vision was a genuine one, and he revealed awesome mysteries to me.

Transformation in Izmir

AMIRAH: Adoneninu Moreinu Malkenu Yarum Hodo

The first-begotten and only Son of God, Shabbetai Tzvi, Messiah and Redeemer of Israel, to all the sons of Israel, Peace!

Since we have been deemed worthy to behold this great day, a day of Redemption and Salvation for Israel, and the fulfillment of God's word and promise by the Prophets and by His beloved Son – your lament and sorrow must change into joy, and your fasting into merriment; for you shall weep no more, O sons of Israel. (Letter of Shabbatai Tzvi to his followers 1666)

Excitement in the Jewish World

And now all the cities of Turkey were full of the expectation of the Messiah; no trade or courses of gain were followed. Everyone imagined that daily provisions, riches, honors and government were to descend upon him by some unknown and miraculous manner.

...some applied themselves immediately to fasting. . .others buried themselves in their gardens. . .others would endure to have melted wax dropped on their shoulders, others to roll themselves in snow. . .but the most common method of mortification was first to prick their backs and sides with thorns and then to give themselves thirty-nine lashes. . . (Sir Paul Rycaut, English Christian diplomat to the Ottoman Empire)

Our joy, when the letters arrived [from Smyrna] is not to be told.⁷ Most of them were addressed to the Sephardim who, as fast as they came, took them to their synagogue and read them aloud; young and old, the Germans too hastened to the Sephardic synagogue.

The Sephardic youth came dressed in their best finery and decked in broad green silk ribbons, the gear of Sabbatai Zevi. «With timbrels and with dances»⁸ they one and all trooped to the synagogue, and they read the letters forth with joy like the «joy of the Feast of Water-Drawing.»⁹

Many sold their houses and lands and all their possessions, for any day they hoped to be redeemed. My good father-in-law left his home in Hameln, abandoned his house and lands and all his goodly furniture, and moved to Hildesheim. He sent on to us in Hamburg two enormous casks packed with linens and with peas, beans, dried meats, shredded prunes and like stuff, every manner of food that would keep. For the old man expected to sail any moment from Hamburg to the Holy Land.

Crash and Burn

The news of Shabbatai turning Turk . . . quickly filled all parts of Turkey. The Jews were strangely surprised at it, and ashamed of their easiness of belief. . .abroad they became the common derision of the towns where they inhabited. . .

And yet most of them affirm that Shabbatai is not turned Turk but his shadow only remains on earth and walks with a white head and in the habit of a Mahometan, but that his body and soul are taken to heaven there to reside until the time appointed for accomplishment of these wonders.

(Sir Paul Rycaut, English Christian diplomat to the Ottoman Empire)