

## **FALSE MESSIAHS - 16th CENTURY**

### **DAVID REUVENI and SHLOMO MOLCHO**

Around 1525 there appeared in Rome a short, stocky, swarthy man, dressed as an Arab, who announced that he was the emissary of his brother Joseph, king of a Jewish kingdom located somewhere near Arabia. He had originally appeared in Cairo in 1523 claiming to be a descendant of the tribe of Reuven. While in Rome, Dovid Reuveni (c1485-c1530's) further claimed that the entire population of his brother's kingdom was descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and that he was the commander of his country's armed forces. He then professed that the object of his visit was to obtain enough ammunition to arm a Jewish force to attack the Moslems from the east. In turn the Christians would attack them from the west. At that time the Turks were waxing triumphant over all their enemies and were constantly expanding their borders, capturing huge swaths of the Balkans. Reuveni's plan soon gained appeal in the Christian world of that day. The pope did not doubt the truth of Reuveni's identity, and received him as befitted an ambassador. He even gave him letters of recommendation to the king of Portugal.

The Jews of Italy and the Conversos of Spain and Portugal were enthusiastic about Reuveni. The idea that a powerful Jewish kingdom existed somewhere in the world helped to raise their self-respect. They believed that when a Jewish ambassador was able to enter negotiations with various European powers, the Jewish state which he represented might then persuade the Christian world to improve the lot of all its Jews. The defenselessness of the Jews in Europe at that time accounted in large part for most of their miseries. It was even hoped that a Jewish restoration of their own land in Palestine would be assured with the aid of Jewish arms.

Dovid Reuveni's fame soon spread throughout the Sephardic world. The rabbis of the time, though, began to warn about his unbelievable schemes,

and tried to put a damper on the rising messianic fervor that his schemes were engendering. Reuveni now openly taught Torah to groups of Conversos who gathered at his home, and he even converted a Moslem maidservant to Judaism. Additionally he encouraged the remainder of the Abarbanel family who still lived in Lisbon to return to Judaism, and he predicted the imminent redemption of Israel.

During this same time period there appeared among the Conversos of Portugal a young man called Diego Pires or Perez (1500-1532). Diego had been brought up as a Christian and had managed to obtain a good post within the local government. He eventually served as secretary at the royal court in Lisbon. When he had occasion to encounter Reuveni in 1525, he tried to persuade him to take him along to the supposed Jewish kingdom where he would then return to Judaism. When Reuveni refused to have anything to do with him, Diego escaped from Portugal, reverted back to his Jewish roots, had himself circumcised, and changed his name to Shlomo Molcho. He initially went to Salonica where he met R. Yosef Caro and where he also delved deeply into the mysteries of Kabbalah. There he became a popular lecturer, and people thronged to hear his discourses. After a brief stay in Safed, Palestine, he went on to Rome where he made the acquaintance of the pope, Clement VII. While in Italy, Molcho preached about the coming redemption, and exhorted the masses to repent. Many members of the Catholic clergy attended these lectures and were greatly inspired by his fiery sermons. After accurately predicting an overflow of the Tiber River, and an earthquake in Portugal (1531), both of which actually happened, Molcho established himself as a man endowed with mystical powers. The Inquisition sought him out as a heretic, a Christian apostate, but the pope himself intervened and aided him in his escape. Shlomo Molcho soon built up a loyal following who declared him to be the bona fide Messiah.

It's hard to determine what the actual motives were of these two men. Were they just trying to gain notoriety, or did they have an actual plan in mind to truly aid the Jews of their age? Some believe that Dovid Reuveni was an actual imposter, and that Shlomo Molcho was a man half-crazed

with religious fanaticism. Others believe that Reuveni did come from one of the lost forgotten settlements of Jews who dwelled near Persia, or possibly even from Ethiopia. Thus, at least part of his story was true. As for Shlomo Molcho, perhaps he was a true visionary. His plans might have envisioned a mass migration of Jews to Eretz Yisroel. Yet there were no concrete plans for such a migration, and no proper leadership.

Reuveni and Molcho eventually gained forces and tried to persuade Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, that they could in fact help defeat the Turks. Charles and his advisors refused to listen. Moreover, many Jews feared that these two men were endangering the slight measure of security which the Jews still enjoyed in Italy and Germany. They thought that Reuveni was lying, and they knew that Molcho was being sought by the Inquisition. Emperor Charles V eventually had them arrested and delivered to the Inquisition at Mantua. Refusing to revert to the Christian faith, Shlomo Molcho was burned at the stake in 1531, but Dovid Reuveni's fate is not definitively known. It seems likely that he might have suffered the same fate, or else died in prison c1535. Thus came to an end this brief period of hope for the Sephardic Jews and Conversos of Europe.