

SHABBETAI ZVI (1626-1676)

FALSE MESSIAH

Many Jews in 17th century Poland looked for the coming of the Messiah in that generation. Kabbalists had calculated that the messianic year would be 1648. All the misfortunes which came upon Central and Eastern Europe in that period served as so much proof that the messianic era was approaching. It was foretold that the Moshiach's arrival was to be preceded by war and pestilence. Ready to be deluded, many Jews fell victim to false messiahs of that time.

On the 9th of Av in the year 1626, in the city of Smyrna, a son was born to a family of Spanish-Judeo origin, and he was named Shabbetai Zvi. The date is significant, for according to Jewish legend, the Moshiach's birth is connected with the date of the destruction of the Temple. The boy was exceptionally bright and received the usual Jewish education. But emerging from boyhood, he found less interest in Talmudic study and engaged more and more in the Zohar and other kabbalistic commentaries. He was also handsome, and was a born leader. Before long a group of young men crowded around him, and he secretly initiated them into the mysteries of the Kabbalah. He looked upon himself, and he was looked upon by others, as destined for great things. He considered his thoughts to be too deep, and his life too pure, for marriage.

Finally in the year 1648, he took a bold step which he had long been plotting, which was to mark him as being on terms of unusual familiarity with G-d. Standing before the Torah in the synagogue, Shabbetai Zvi pronounced the name of G-d as it is written, not as usually spoken by Jews. Counting on the widespread expectations for the year 1648, He meant this act to symbolize the beginning of his messianic career. Shocked by his blasphemy, the leaders of the Smyrna community excommunicated him, and he was compelled to go elsewhere. However, far from discrediting

him, his bold actions and his messianic claims, supported by evidence from kabbalistic writings, won for him adherents wherever he went.

Most of Shabbetai Zvi's followers were honest men, anxious to believe in him. Some were no doubt adventurers ready to take advantage of the credulity of the masses. Shabbetai Zvi lost no opportunity to advance his cause. In the presence of learned men and kabbalists in Salonica, he suddenly produced a marriage canopy and a scroll of the Torah, and went through a marriage ceremony with the Torah as his bride. His audience was more shocked than impressed, and he was forced to wander further. For years he moved from place to place, looking for adherents, but biding his time till the next opportunity arose. In Cairo he finally found an environment fitted for his purpose.

In Cairo the wealthy Raphael Joseph Chelebi supported in his home a number of pious followers of the teachings of the Ari z"l. Shabbetai Zvi found a place among them, and soon showed his personal and kabbalistic superiority over them all. When Chelebi sent a mission to Jerusalem for the purpose of distributing charity, he picked Shabbetai Zvi. To the starving mystics of the Holy City, he appeared as literally a divine messenger. At this point in his life Shabbetai Zvi met Nathan of Gaza, a young man who claimed, and was generally credited with, possessing prophetic powers. Nathan, it is believed, suggested a messianic career to Shabbetai Zvi. Nathan undertook to announce himself as a reincarnation of the Prophet Elijah, and to spread the pronouncement that Shabbetai Zvi was the Moshiach.

The pious people of Israel fell in with this idea, which corresponded to the mystical belief that the Moshiach must first appear in Jerusalem. Upon Shabbetai Zvi's return to Cairo, Chelebi's group of mystics also supported his claims. At the same time a rumor began to spread of the imminent appearance of the Moshiach. For several years the Jews of Europe had been hearing the story of a young girl, named Sarah, whose parents had been murdered by the Chmielnicki marauders. She related that subsequently her dead father had kidnapped her from the nunnery where

she was being brought up. He told her that she was destined to be the bride of the Messiah. She wandered from one Jewish community to another, everywhere arousing sympathy and obtaining aid from the local Jews. Shabbetai Zvi, hearing of her, invited Sarah to become his wife. The wedding was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony at the home of Chelebi.

Provided now with a rich patron, in the person of Chelebi, and with a wife who had predicted that she would marry the Messiah, Sabbetai Zvi began the next phase of his life. Backed by followers who represented the most respected mystics, and supported by a prophet, Nathan of Gaza, he now went about proclaiming that he was indeed the Moshiach. As the news spread among the downtrodden, helpless, miracle-hungry Jews of Europe, it was greeted with a frenzy of enthusiasm. At last the age of misery was coming to an end! People danced in wild exaltation; even the Sephardim of Amsterdam and Hamburg indulged in boundless joy.

Many practical men of affairs hastily disposed of their possessions and laid in supplies for the journey to Jerusalem, which they believed to be imminent. One after another, Talmudists and even former opponents of Shabbetai Zvi, joined the ranks of his followers. The Christians of Europe stood by watching in wonder. Even their own mystics had predicted that the Messiah's second coming would occur in the year 1666.

As the fateful year approached, Shabbetai Zvi was compelled to take some action. He announced that he was going to Constantinople where, at the mere sight of him, the sultan would give up his throne, and Shabbetai Zvi would become the king of kings. But when his ship, crowded with his followers, arrived at the Turkish port, Shabbetai Zvi was arrested and placed in a fortress at Abydus. He then announced that his visit to the sultan would come later. In the meantime, he held regular court in the fortress within which he was able to move freely about. Jews from Europe, Asia, and Africa arrived in crowds to pay homage to the messiah. In return, Shabbetai Zvi and his prophets issued commands and proclamations to Jews all over the world.

Among Shabbetai Zvi's proclamations was one directed to the Jews of Poland in which he promised them a great future and an end to all their sorrows. He ordered them to send him an individual named Nehemiah Cohen. This man was himself regarded as the prophet of a messiah, who was still to come. Shabbetai Zvi wanted to convince him that there was no need for waiting, that he was that Messiah. Nehemiah Cohen came to Abydus and talked at length with Shabbetai Zvi. He emerged from these discussions more sure than ever that Shabbetai Zvi was not the Moshiach. For this disbelief, Nehemiah's life was threatened by zealous Shabbetians. The Polish prophet could only save himself by running to the Moslem authorities and promising to convert to Islam. Upon Nehemiah Cohen's advice to the Turkish authorities, Shabbetai Zvi was finally taken before the sultan. Challenged to prove his boast, or suffer the death penalty, he quickly abandoned all his claims and promises. He accepted a petty post in the Ottoman court, and even consented to become a Muslim.

This event was a stunning blow to those Jews who had put all their faith and hope in the promise of miraculous deliverance. Not only were their hopes disappointed, but the one who had aroused them had gone over to another religion. Shabbetai Zvi and his immediate followers tried to offer an explanation. They claimed that at the last moment G-d had revealed to the messiah that the time was not yet ripe for redemption. There were still too many unbelievers, too many sins for which atonement had to be made. The messiah, therefore, had himself volunteered to go into exile among the Ishmaelites as a means of atoning for the people's sins, and thus hastening the end of the exile. Some of Shabbetai Zvi's followers argued further that the one who had become a Moslem was not Shabbetai Zvi himself, but a human image of him. He himself had ascended to heaven to wait for a more opportune time.

This bizarre mixture of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity was actually accepted by a number of Shabbetai Zvi's followers. They were so anxious to help him atone for the sins of the Jewish people, as quickly as possible, that they chose to follow him into "exile". They, too, converted to Islam, not

for the sake of Islam, but for the sake of Judaism. Eventually these converted Jews and their descendants, waiting for generations for the return of Shabbetai Zvi from exile, became a sect within Islam called the Donmeh. This, however, involved but a small portion of the disillusioned followers of the messiah. The rest turned sadly back to their ordinary tasks, angered and chagrined at the mystics who had misled them. They were more than ready to follow the more level-headed Talmudists who had warned them against their misguided enthusiasm. Shabbetai Zvi had given them, though, hope and self esteem, if only for a short time. The leaders of Jewish life now undertook to guard the Talmudic and legal ramparts of Judaism, and to suppress any further manifestation of overemphasized mysticism.