

Another False Messiah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The fast on the Ninth of Av, Tisha B'Av, commemorates both the Babylonian and the Roman destructions of Jerusalem and the First Temple, in 586 BCE and then in 70 CE. The mourning for these cataclysmic losses affected law, lore, and the psychology of Jews no matter where they were exiled. Anyone who thinks Zionism is a response to the Holocaust is just an ignorant fool.

The dream of returning to the Land of Israel and rebuilding Jerusalem became positively obsessive as reflected in our liturgy. Not a generation went by without pilgrimage and settlement, however small. Regardless of how well or badly Jews were integrated into their host societies, from Nachmanides and Yehudah Halevy to Alroi, from Spain in the West to Persia in the East, each generation produced its rabbis and messiahs who tried to return to Zion.

Of these, one of the most colorful was Shabtai Zvi. He was born in Izmir and lived from 1626 to 1676. He captured the imagination and support of a whole generation of Jews across the world. His conversion to Islam was such a profound shock that it took years to overcome and was a major cause both of the suppression of mysticism and the obsessive defensiveness that still characterizes much of Orthodoxy.

Scholars from Gershom Scholem to Moshe Idel have argued about the man and his message and about whether he was a genuine mystic, a charlatan, a brilliant pretender, or simply sick. Perhaps he was all of these. But I believe one should look at him through the prism of Zion.

He was born on the Ninth of Av. This in itself, in a credulous world, would have been a significant omen. He came from a prominent family in Izmir and was a prodigy. But he was also a rebel against what he saw as the oppressive rigidity and conformism of the Jewish community. His interest in Kabbalah led him to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy. So he set off, or was encouraged to leave, on a tour of Greece and Turkey, in which he sought out mystical teachers of different traditions. Wherever he ended up, his antinomian, charismatic personality led to ideological conflict and clashes. The more he was rejected the more outlandish his challenges to the law and authority.

In Egypt in 1662, he met the celebrated scholar and merchant Rafael Yosef Chelebi. Chelebi had done a lot to settle refugees from Iberia, and now he was concerned about the large numbers of Eastern Europeans displaced by the terrible (in Ukraine today he's a hero) Bogdan Chmielnicki massacres of 1648 and the Catholic reprisals. The Sephardi communities of the Mediterranean were not that happy to be inundated with what they considered unwashed, Ashkenazi peasants. Chelebi had an interest in encouraging as many as possible to resettle in the Holy Land.

Apart from Safed, which had become a major center for Jews fleeing the Spanish expulsion because there was a textile industry, there was nothing in

the Holy Land to sustain large numbers of immigrants. Chelebi wanted to persuade the Ottoman authorities to permit the establishment of new industries and agricultural settlements. But he needed a front man, someone with presence and stature to impress the Ottoman authorities as a spiritual man of peace rather than a commercial speculator. or worse, a military adventurer. The sultan hated instability but did respect spirituality.

Opinions vary as to whether Chelebi persuaded Shabtai that he could better impress Jew and non-Jew alike as the Messiah, or whether it was Nathan of Gaza, the Svengali he met on the way to canvass opinion in Jerusalem, who persuaded him he was the Messiah. Perhaps he always deluded himself into thinking he was a kind of mystical superhero. In one way he might be compared to Theodore Herzl, who cultivated an elegance and presence that enabled him to present himself as the Prince of the Jews, giving him easier access to the European aristocratic courts. And Shabtai's desire to involve other religions and populations in his project anticipates Buber, Scholem, and other idealistic Zionists.

Shabtai's assuming the Messianic mantle brought him the attention of the whole of the Jewish world, which desperately dreamed of returning to Zion and casting off the burden of exile. Even Gluckel of Hameln was so excited she started salting meat for the journey, and brokers at Lloyds took bets as to whether the Messiah had arrived.

But the Ottoman authorities came to see Shabtai as disruptive, doubtless encouraged by his Jewish and his Muslim enemies. He was given the choice: death or the turban. He converted to Islam but still maintained he was the Messiah working in mysterious ways as did Nathan of Gaza. Perhaps his disillusionment with Jewish authority convinced him he needed to escape the limitations of Judaism and reach out to Muslims and Christians too, because he persisted in presenting himself as all things to all people. The Ottomans lost patience with his prevarications and he was exiled to Dulcino in Albania, where he died still hoping to reconcile all three monotheistic faiths. For years his followers remained loyal, and a group of Turks called the Donmeh continue to revere him to this day.

I have always had a soft spot for him, despite his weird sex life and peculiar halachic deviations. I want to give Shabtai the benefit of the doubt. He saw himself as a metaphor for his people. The Jewish world was traumatized by exile and continuing humiliation. It was not always physical suffering, but alienation, a feeling of being unfairly singled out for hatred. The only possible escape was the Messiah leading the return to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple. But if the Jews had the means, they simply lacked the unity, the political power, and the allies to make it happen. Mysticism was the only option. Sadly, the political conditions were not right. It took another 300 years for pieces, good and bad, to come together. The Almighty has always had a different timetable.

So as we mark Tisha B'Av this year again, as we have for two thousand years, we will reiterate our ancient commitment never to forget our love for the land and our holy city and its centrality to our fate, as it was to Shabtai. Of course we will realize that for two thousand years we have had to share it

with others, and it looks like only the real Messiah will be able to sort it all out.