

TWO FALSE MESSIAHS - SHABTAI ZVI AND JACOB FRANK

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Shabtai Zvi (SZ) was born 1626, 10 years after Shakespeare's death. He was born in Smyrna Turkey. Turkey ruled the Ottoman Empire at that time, which included Greece, Egypt and Israel. He learned kabbalah (which was a common interest of messianic pretenders.) At age 22, he declared himself to be the long-awaited meshiach. That got him banished from Smyrna.

SZ moved to Salonica Greece. In Salonica, he attracted followers. He did unusual things, like inviting his followers to his wedding in which he married a Torah. That got him banished from Salonica.

SZ moved to Cairo, where he attracted more followers, including wealthy donors. While in Cairo, SZ heard news reports of a woman in Italy, named Sarah, who had a unique background. She was born in Ukraine. Her parents were murdered in a Khmilnitzki pogrom. She was raised in a convent. She moved to Lavorno Italy, where she became a prostitute. She spread a story that she was destined to become the bride of the messiah. SZ had her brought to Cairo, where married her. Her promiscuous background raised eyebrows. But SZ explained that it was Gd's plan for the messiah to marry a woman with such a background. His new wife Sarah became respected and popular with SZ's followers

SZ travelled toward Jerusalem. When passing through Gaza, he met a man named Nathan of Gaza. Nathan explained that he, Nathan, is the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, who according to legend will announce the messiah and that he, Nathan, recognized SZ as being the true messiah. Nathan joined SZ's messianic movement, and served as SZ's spokesman

Flush with wealth from his rich donors, his new wife, his groupies, and his new prophet, SZ continued on to Jerusalem. The rabbis in Jerusalem asked him to leave.

So he travelled to Smyrna Turkey, which was the city of his birth, and the city that previously banished him. But now, Smyrna Jews welcomed him with great acclaim because of his great success

SZ's fame and his messianic movement became a sensation throughout Europe and Mediterranean. Fantastic stories were being spread about the approaching redemption, for example that the 10 lost tribes has finally been found. Jews throughout Europe were selling off their property in preparation for moving to the promised land. Jews were gullible due to their desperation to believe anything that might bring hope for an end to their hardships.

In Smyrna Turkey, SZ received divine revelations to change Jewish rules. For example that *Tisha B'Av* be changed from a day of fasting to a day of feasting, and that the hind quarter of the cow that was previously unkosher is now kosher, and that he may now pronounce Gd's 4-letter name that was previously prohibited.

Finally, SZ implemented the grand finale of his messianic ambition. He travel to Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman empire, to be crowned *melech hamashiach*, the king messiah. But the sultan in Constantinople felt threatened, and imprisoned him.

In prison, SZ was treated like royalty. He received guests. Funds were flowing to him from his followers around the world. His groupies camped out by the prison to be near him. Fantastic news stories were being spread about miracles he was performing in prison.

The sultan had enough, and gave SZ a choice: Either (i)

prove you are the messiah by surviving a firing squad of archers or (ii) convert to islam. AZ chose islam, as did his wife. Sultan gave SZ a new Muslim name, a new Muslim wife, and a position in the palace.

After converting to Islam, SZ continued his messianic pretensions to the Jews. SZ explained to Jews that his conversion to Islam was part of Gd's plan to attract Muslims to Judaism. At the same time, he explained to the sultan that his association with Jews was a plan to attract Jews to Islam.

SZ's conversion to Islam was a severe blow, not only to his followers, but to all Jews. Imagine: the most world-renowned and most-celebrated leader in Judaism, abandoned Judaism. Most of his followers quit.

But there were communities of Jews (called Sabbatians) that maintained their faith in SZ. They maintained their Sabbatian identity and their Sabbatian community intact, for the next 200 years.

Some Sabbatians in Greece were so convinced that SZ's conversion was what Gd wanted that they converted along with him. They were called Donmeh (which is Turkish for conversos), that practiced a Donmeh faith (that included elements of Judaism and elements of Islam). They maintained their Donmeh identity and their Donmeh community intact, for the next 250 years until, in 1910, the Greek government expelled them from Greece. They relocated to Turkey, where they disappeared.

SZ died in 1676 at age of 50.

In the 1700s, 50 years after SZ's death, which was exactly 100 years after SZ's birth, a Sabbatian family in Ukraine had a baby name Jacob Lebowitz. His name was later changed to Jacob Frank (Frank is the Turkish word for European). He, like SZ, learned kabala and Zohar. Jacob Frank declared himself the reincarnation of SZ. He had a revelation from Gd that, in preparation of the final redemption, he and his followers must convert to Christianity, as an intermediate stage toward an ultimate improved version of Judaism, called Frankism. Over the course of years, he, along with 26K followers, converted to Catholicism. The Catholic church of Poland, which ruled Ukraine, at first honored him for bringing so many Jews into the faith. But the Catholic church later imprisoned him for heresy. After 13 years, he was freed by the Russian army that conquered Ukraine from Poland. He later moved to Germany, where he lived out the rest of his life as a wealthy nobleman with the title of "Baron of Offenbach".

These messianic movements (of SZ and Jacob Frank) were devastating for the Jews. (1) It gave the Jews false hopes, that were later dashed. (2) It caused the Jews to waste a huge amount of hope, effort and resources. (3) It resulted in many Jews leaving the faith. (4) It brought international ridicule upon the Jewish faith.

The rabbis learned from these messianic movements to beware of 3 warning signs: (1) Beware of a movement that believes its leader has mystical powers. (2) Beware of a movement that accentuates kabbalah and Zohar at the expense of Talmud. (3) Beware of a movement that professes to be divinely inspired to change Jewish traditions.

When the messianic movements were waning, there arose a new movement that displayed all 3 warning signs – Chasidism. The Vilna Gaon in Lithuania was alarmed, and excommunicated the chasidim in 1772.

After a number of years, the rabbis reconciled with the chasidim when they found chasidism was not becoming a problem, and when they observed, looming on the horizon, the growth of a movement that posed a more insidious danger to Judaism – the Haskalah movement -- the Jewish enlightenment.

