

Mavericks, Mystics & False Messiahs
Episodes from the Margins of Jewish History



Pini Dunner

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False Messiahs

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the Margins
of Jewish History

The Toby Press

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The Toby Press, LLC
POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 2455, London W1A 5WY, England

www.tobypress.com

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The publication of this book was made possible through the support of Torah Education in Israel and The Jewish Book Trust.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-510-7, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

In loving memory

of

my dear parents

Aba Dunner

(1937–2011)

&

Miriam Dunner

(1941–2006)

*You are my inspiration
each and every day*

In honor of our father

Hershel Golker

*who always teaches us
the importance of learning Torah
and the reverence of Jewish leaders.*

May he continue to do so

עד מאה ועשרים

*With everlasting gratitude,
his children and grandchildren*

*From London to LA,
Rabbi Pini and Sabine lead and inspire wherever they are.*

*Distances don't separate
our admiration, friendship, and respect.
Proud to be their friends for decades
and, God willing, decades to come.*

*Maurice and Gabriella
Jerusalem, Israel*

*Supporting this book is but a small way
of showing appreciation
to our friend and Rav, Pini Dunner.
He made Yiddishkeit sing for us and our family.*

*Penny and Mike Sinclair
London, England*

~~~~~

*Michael and Sheryl Rosenberg  
and family  
are proud to dedicate this book  
in memory of their dear father*

**Stanley Diller ז"ל**

**שמואל זנוויל בן אהרן יעקב דילער ביגלאייזען ז"ל**

*a Holocaust survivor who became one of  
the Los Angeles Jewish community's  
greatest philanthropists and leaders.  
נפטר לבית עולמו עשרה בטבת תשע"ב*

~~~~~

To Pini

Congratulations on the publication of your book,

Mavericks, Mystics & False Messiahs,

an apt subject for you.

I wish you every success with this wonderful publication.

*Lee Samson
Beverly Hills, California*

In loving memory of

Dorothy and Sherman Broidy
D'vorah bat Chaim ז"ל
Shaya Getzel ben Nathaniel ז"ל

*who taught their children and grandchildren Judaism,
to love Israel, to support Jewish continuity,
and to think positively.*

Robin and Elliott Broidy and Family

~~~~~

*Dedicated in memory of*

**Alex Friedman**

שלמה ז"ל

*and*

**Eva Friedman**

חיה ע"ה

*by*

*Andrew and Chanie Friedman*  
*Los Angeles, California*

*In loving memory of*

ימין בן מסעוד ז"ל  
חיים בן ימין ז"ל  
גבריאל בן ימין ז"ל  
יהודה בן מסעוד ז"ל  
מרק בן הודה ז"ל

*Jacques and Natalie Wizman  
Beverly Hills, California*

~~~~

In loving memory of

my dear wife
Andy Curry
עלקא מאשא ע"ה
בת ר' חיים זלמן

my dear husband
Laurence Beresford
ר' אליעזר ז"ל
בן ר' בערל

Dedicated by
Lionel Curry and Ruth Beresford-Curry
London, England

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Foreword

Jewish history has produced a host of peculiar characters from biblical times onward but the gallimaufry of those depicted in this book is remarkable by any standard.

Some of the personalities described by Rabbi Dunner were revered religious leaders; others were confidence tricksters. In several cases (and these are the most perplexing) they were both at the same time.

What brings together all these stories is the clash between credulity and evidence-based reasoning – a conflict that lies at the heart of the Jewish experience since the Enlightenment.

In my book *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln*, on which Rabbi Dunner bases his account of that adventurer, I compared him with the eighteenth-century “pseudo-Messiah” Jacob Frank, who led his followers out of Judaism into Christianity. Trebitsch moved from Judaism to Buddhism. The most famous such figure, Shabbetai Tzvi, turned from Judaism to Islam.

These are merely three of the large number of such characters who emerged throughout the Jewish world – and beyond. History has tended to consign such men (and in a few cases women) to the margins, labeling them pretenders and pathologizing them as mentally

ill. They are often seen as products of pre-modern societies prone to mass enthusiasms and delusions.

In all these cases spiritual enthusiasm, whipped up to a frenzy, gave rise to a revolutionary religious movement. Sometimes, as in the case of Trebitsch, this was pitifully small and short-lived. The Sabbatian sect known as Dönme was much larger and persisted until the twentieth century as a distinctive element within Islam. In the case of Jesus, what began as a sect of Judaism changed the history of the world.

Rabbi Dunner notes that both Shabbetai Tzvi and Trebitsch-Lincoln insisted even after their conversions that they remained Jews. The same is, of course, true of many converts who regard their apostasy not as betrayal but as ultimate fulfillment; one need only think of St. Paul and “Jews for Jesus.” Another significant recent example was the late Cardinal Lustiger, archbishop of Paris. At his funeral at Notre Dame Cathedral his great-nephew recited the Kaddish.

But how wide a gulf really separated them from a latter-day holy man such as the late Menachem Schneerson (the Lubavitcher Rebbe), many of whose followers worship him as the Messiah?

It might be said that one difference is that Schneerson, unlike Shabbetai Tzvi, never himself claimed such a status. But even if that is true, it does not dispose of the matter. The same might, after all, be said of the Jew Jesus. The Jewishness of the mainstream Lubavitch movement is largely unquestioned nowadays, but given the historical precedent, whether this will continue to be the case in future generations remains to be seen.

Judaism, particularly that minority part of it that calls itself “Orthodox,” often prides itself on its singularity and freedom from the taint of external influences. Yet the evidence of historical reality tells a different story. The Talmud, for example, is riddled with the intellectual influences of Hellenistic, Babylonian, and other surrounding cultures.

A diasporic society such as that of the Jews could not be isolationist. Intellectual openness and syncretism formed an essential condition of Judaism’s development and survival. It is impossible to understand Maimonides outside the context of the circumambient Islamic and

Mediterranean worlds. Similarly, Moses Mendelssohn was not only the founder of the *Haskala* (the Jewish Enlightenment) but part and parcel of the German and European age of reason.

What is new in the post-Enlightenment Jewish world is the phenomenon of Jewishness without Judaism, sometimes without any religion at all. One aspect of this is the “non-Jewish Jew” – to use the term that the secular socialist historian Isaac Deutscher used about himself. Another aspect is the secular Zionist such as Theodor Herzl, whose path to Jewish nationalism began with the vision of himself leading a procession of his coreligionists to the baptismal font. Both socialism and Zionism began among Jews as revolutions against religious authority. Yet both assumed quasi-messianic features as they grew into mass movements.

In the fusion since 1967 of hyper-religiosity with ultra-nationalism among some Jews in both Israel and the Diaspora, we encounter another form of Messianism. Its adherents see this as rooted in Jewish tradition; others condemn it as a perversion akin to that of the “pseudo-Messiahs” of yore.

The historian’s task, it is often said, is not to judge. I am not so sure. There is certainly a requirement to do more than just record. If the historian is to transcend the level of the mere chronicler, there must be at least an effort at interpretation – or, to put it another way, at evidence-based analysis. That surely is what distinguishes the historian from the traditional *maggid* who told fantastic tales to receptive audiences. Yet in what follows Rabbi Dunner marries the two together in exemplary fashion by bringing the fruits of professional historical scholarship to a broad readership.

The battle between credulity and reasoned argument endures in our own time. This book affords ample testimony to the epic nature of this struggle within the soul of the Jew over the past several centuries.

Bernard Wasserstein
Professor Emeritus of Modern European Jewish History,
The University of Chicago
Amsterdam, December 2017/5778

Introduction

“There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.”

HARRY S. TRUMAN

“We are not makers of history, we are made by history.”

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Winston Churchill is frequently quoted as having said that history belongs to the victor. It is not clear that he actually did say these words, but it is certainly the case that history belongs to those who survive long enough to tell the tale. The question is: What happens to those historical actors who have left no distinctive impression on the broader story? For the most part they are consigned to the margins and footnotes – if they are remembered at all – and the majority of them disappear completely from mainstream consciousness, deemed by posterity to be irrelevant.

Curiously, it is these marginal characters that have always fascinated me. I believe their influence on events as they unfolded, during the period in which they lived and on the future, was far stronger than may seem years later. Take the messianic pretender Shabbetai Tzvi, about whom you will find a chapter in this book. Shabbetai Tzvi was hugely important for a few years, but ultimately – at least if judged by his own ambitions – he and his supporters were an utter failure. His story was a flash in the pan, nothing more than a noisy distraction. Even if he was a dangerous fraud and a

successful troublemaker in the years he was active, in the end he achieved nothing meaningful. His impact on Jewish life was certainly important at the time, but today, hundreds of years later, it appears that his life and actions have no bearing on any person or movement within the Jewish world.

In reality, however, he had a profound effect on Judaism then and now, even if it was entirely inadvertent. It is an effect that continues to reverberate to this day. His irregular activities and the furor they created crystallized some important theological issues for the rabbis and community leaders of his era, who through him and the impact of his messianic aspirations recognized the stark dangers posed by not defining in the clearest possible terms Jewish mystical ideas that could be easily misinterpreted and manipulated, so that someone like him could succeed. The fact that Shabbetai Tzvi existed and created such chaos in the Jewish world prompted responsible leadership in the Jewish world – people who had seen him in action and witnessed the chaos he had generated as it unfolded – to put up the guardrails and prevent such a disaster from happening again in the future.

As a case in point, another chapter of this book contains an account of the Emden-Eybeschutz controversy, which was a continuation, one hundred years later, of the Shabbetai Tzvi controversy. Rabbi Yaakov Emden's stand against Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz – whether he was justified in his accusations or not – was a final battle against covert Sabbatian mystics and their insidious publicists who were secretly insinuating themselves into the mainstream Jewish world. So although Shabbetai Tzvi's story was inconsequential in terms of his attempt to lead the Jews out of exile and back to the Promised Land, it would be foolish to dismiss it as a historical sideshow.

We tend to look at the history of Jewish life in a linear way, ignoring or dismissing the influences and the stimulators from beyond the comfort zone of traditional Judaism. But we must ask ourselves: What were the outside factors that influenced what happened on the inside? How did the Shabbetai Tzvi and Emden-Eybeschutz controversies affect how we live our lives as Jews in the twenty-first century? How did the *Get* of Cleves controversy – another episode included in this book – influence Jewish law going forward, so that rulings arrived at today are determined by this seemingly marginal episode?

Rather than looking at the broad narrative of history, the uniting theme of this book is the very individual personalities of these marginal characters and the impact they had during the time in which they lived. But all the mavericks whose lives are explored in this book somehow represent – in their individuality and their unique stories – aspects of the broader narrative of their eras.

So, in the first instance, I am fascinated by how aspects of Jewish history which occur outside of the spotlight have a residual effect on what is happening onstage.

But truthfully, I am also fascinated by historical aberrations and am drawn to bygone eccentrics. I would like to think this is because oddities tend to shed light on what is wrong with the system that produced them. If one asks any sociologist or therapist, they will say that the irregularities they deal with on a daily basis are often consequences of problems within contemporary society at large.

A good example of this phenomenon is Ignatz Trebitsch-Lincoln, the protagonist of another chapter in this book. Trebitsch-Lincoln was brought up in a fully observant Orthodox Jewish home in Hungary, but evolved into something comparable to the “Zelig” character from the eponymous Woody Allen movie, jumping from one personality to another, working hard to blend in. He is constantly on the margins of important events, but in the end is just a noisy shadow whose enduring impact was negligible, but whose peculiar life tells you much about the era in which he lived, both in terms of his own journey, and in relation to the different groups he attempted to join and influence.

In my view, Trebitsch-Lincoln, and other flamboyant Jewish characters of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are extreme examples of numerous others of their era who had also drifted away from the Orthodoxy and values of their upbringing and adopted bewildering new personas while attaching themselves to causes or creeds that were entirely unconnected or only loosely connected with their past.

Most of them remained embedded in their new communities for the rest of their lives, having abandoned their past to a greater or lesser extent for some kind of alternative. This description encapsulates most of the Jews who emigrated out of Eastern and Central Europe, and made new lives for themselves in Western Europe, the United States,

or Ottoman Palestine. Many of them completely abandoned their past and adopted new behaviors and new life ideals.

As preposterous as it may sound, perhaps this phenomenon can be highlighted by comparing the debonair Hungarian-born trickster Trebitsch-Lincoln to Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, who doesn't belong in this book. His success as an international statesman is never questioned, but perhaps it is no coincidence that his origins were not dissimilar to those of Trebitsch-Lincoln.

Weizmann is almost exclusively remembered as an urbane Russian-born British-based scientist, and as the smooth-talking cultured diplomat who was comfortable mixing with the ruling classes of the world's major powers. But his origins in Russia do not chime with this image. He was the third of fifteen children; his father was a wood wholesaler and devoutly Orthodox. In order to become the man he would later be, Weizmann utterly abandoned his past and adopted an entirely new persona, quite foreign to the *shtetl* milieu of his youth.

As it turned out, Weizmann leveraged this guise for the benefit of his coreligionists and devoted his life to furthering the cause of Zionism – unlike Trebitsch, who was a narcissist and a scoundrel and did nothing for anyone but himself. Nonetheless, the pathology is remarkably similar. Both Weizmann and Trebitsch were brought up in an insular Orthodox setting and were part of a deeply traditional Jewish community, and both of them, when they abandoned their origins, shaped their public personas around a sophisticated and cultivated modern society that was very far removed from the way of life they had seen in the homes of their parents.

For some reason, we only ever examine Weizmann's life through the lens of his Zionism and his political activism, ignoring or only superficially giving any attention to the total shift from his origins that enabled him to become such a successful Zionist advocate and activist, and for that reason alone it might be important to read Trebitsch-Lincoln's story so that we can truly encounter this elusive and intriguing side of that period in Jewish history.

After all, if we properly appreciate the extent of the upheavals such personal transformations required, we might better understand the huge sacrifices made not just by Weizmann but also by the Zionist

pioneers who moved from Lithuania, or Russia, or Rumania, or Poland, to join a new agricultural settlement in Ottoman Palestine in the late 1800s. Or we might understand the tribulations experienced by Jewish immigrants to the United States – both those who succeeded and those who struggled to prosper.

In order to obtain an accurate reading of the social dynamics that produced these kinds of Jews, and to appreciate the extent of the transformations they all went through to do what they did, one needs to focus on an extreme – and Ignatz Trebitsch-Lincoln is the perfect foil. By traveling along the roller coaster that was Trebitsch-Lincoln's life we gain an insight into the lifestyle transformations required of a person like Chaim Weizmann, which he undertook so that he would succeed in his quest for a Jewish national home.

Finally, it goes without saying that the stories of an intriguing eccentric such as Trebitsch-Lincoln, or of the very peculiar Shabbetai Tzvi, or about the very disturbing Emden-Eybeschütz controversy, are diverting and compelling in their own way, and it is certainly the case that this is an important factor when it comes to studying history. Of course, in pure historical terms, it is primarily important for us to be familiar with the broad details of history – the factors that led up to the French Revolution, for example, or the military history of the First World War – but that kind of broad-brush narrative is never going to be as interesting as the story of a crazy fraudster, or how it was that a messianic pretender could have convinced devout rabbis he was the Messiah.

I think that when people get excited about some marginal aspect of history they are inevitably going to become more interested in the conventional historical narratives that are rather less engaging. As a student of history, who is fascinated by history and who loves the rich tapestry that is history, I strongly believe this book will excite its readers through the very entertaining anecdotes and vignettes that recall marginal characters within the Jewish historical narrative, and will consequently stimulate a wider audience to look further into Jewish history.

Perhaps, after reading about the characters and episodes in this book, the reader will want to find out more about the rather more mundane aspects of the origins of Jewish life, including details of Jewish community history, and the rabbis and significant figures who led those

communities that made the Jewish world what it is today. Knowing how Judaism evolved throughout its history can only enrich Judaism and the engagement with Jewish identity. If the stories in this book succeed in acting as the conduit to a strengthened Jewish identity, for that reason alone this book will have been worth every effort.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book of any subject or length can be produced without the help of others. The byline may have the author's name, but in the background are numerous others whose assistance and encouragement created the platform for the author to produce his written work.

First and foremost I would like to thank all those people who have fed my insatiable appetite for obscure information on random subjects of Jewish and general interest. I am a self-confessed information addict, and over the years I have been generously enabled by numerous information providers on every topic that has ever grabbed my attention.

Although this is not an exhaustive list, hopefully it includes everyone who has had a hand in providing me with nuggets of information that have found their way into this book, in one form or another: the indefatigable Menachem Butler of Harvard Law School, Allan Engel (the first person to introduce me to the insane world of Ignatz Trebitsch-Lincoln), Rabbi Eliezer Katzman, Professor David Latchman, and my dear friend Moshe Leib Weiser of London. My profound appreciation to all of you for sharing your knowledge with me and for helping me put this collection of historical episodes together.

I would also like to thank Professor Bernard Wasserstein for his invaluable research into Ignatz Trebitsch-Lincoln and the comprehensive book he wrote on this enigmatic figure. I wish to thank him for agreeing to write the foreword, and for his generous words about my humble attempt to summarize his valuable tome for a wide readership.

My thanks, too, to Professor Shnayer Leiman, who kindly agreed to read through the extended chapter on the Emden-Eybeschütz controversy, the chapter on the Shabbetai Tzvi affair, and the chapter on the notorious literary forger, Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, and to offer his insights and observations, based on his decades of research into these particular aspects of modern Jewish history. His comments, delivered in

typically humble style, were extremely helpful and insightful, and I am grateful for his scholarship, but most of all for his friendship.

My appreciation also goes to Daniel Kestenbaum, of Kestenbaum Judaica Auctions in New York, and to his able assistant, Jackie Insel, for kindly assisting me in obtaining the image of the Baal Shem of London.

I also thank Deborah Thompson, the diligent author's assistant who stepped in toward the end of the preparation period to ensure that all the details of the book's manuscript were in order so that it could be submitted for publication. Deborah expertly pulled all the strands together and made it happen.

Which brings me to Toby Press, who enthusiastically embraced this project and did everything to turn the dream of this book into a reality. In particular, I would like to thank Toby Press's editor-in-chief, Gila Fine, and her esteemed colleague, Matthew Miller, publisher of Toby. Thanks are also due to editors Nechama Unterman, Ilana Sobel, and Shira Finson.

This book would never have happened without the eager enthusiasm for Jewish history articles of Shalom Rubashkin, editor of our local Jewish newspaper in Los Angeles, *Jewish Home LA*. Without his delivery deadlines, and gentle reminders to submit the articles on time for press day, all of the incredible historical episodes in this book might have remained unwritten. I am forever indebted to Shalom for showcasing my Jewish history knowledge on these quite obscure events and people in the pages of his newspaper. Other newspaper editors might have pushed me to take a more mainstream approach to my chosen topics, but Shalom vigorously encouraged me to share unusual narratives, which ultimately allowed for the preparation of this book, using the original articles as the draft manuscript.

Last, and by no means least, let me thank my dear wife, Sabine, whose incredible patience and enduring forbearance for my literary obsession, as I clatter away on my laptop keyboard late at night and randomly scatter books around the house, is deeply appreciated. She has an equal share in all of my output. Her constant encouragement for me to write, to speak, to teach, and to involve myself in communal affairs is the engine that makes everything I do possible, and better. No "thank you" will ever truly suffice, but I must thank her nonetheless, for this book, and for every other one of my successes.

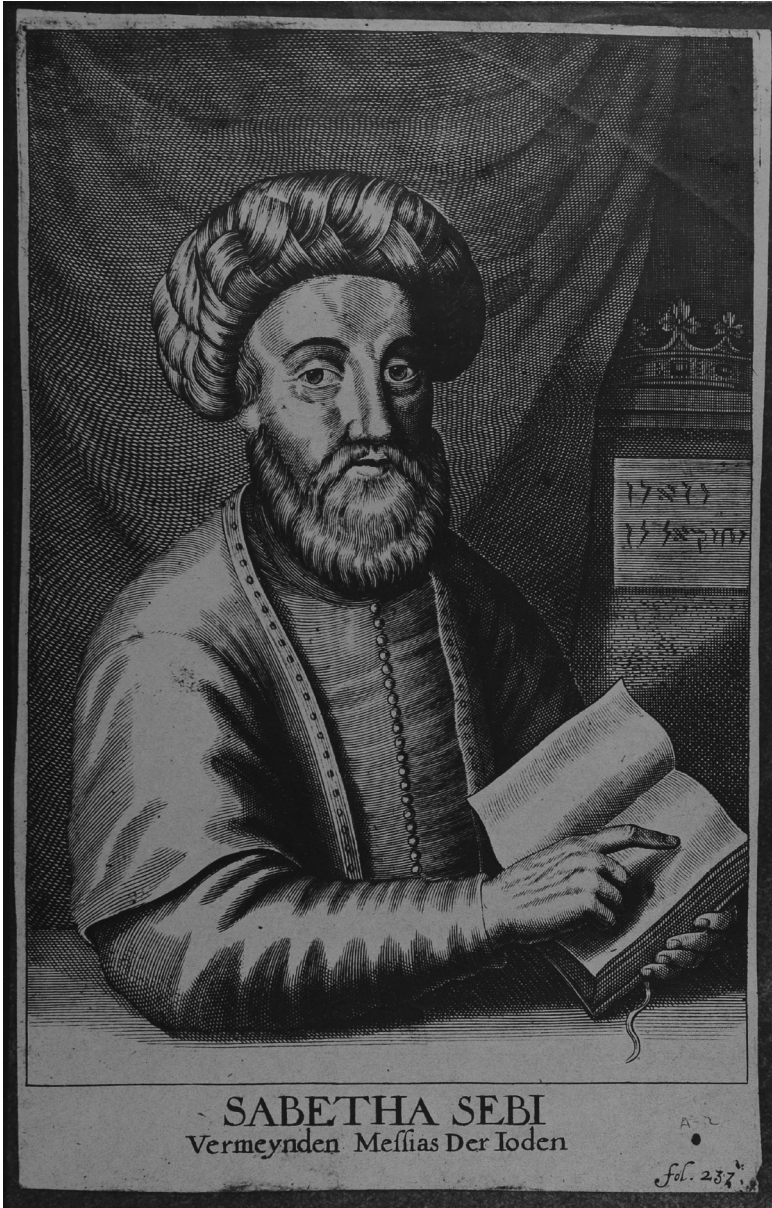
Chapter 1

Shabbetai Tzvi: Notorious Messianic Deceiver

Constantinople, 1666

“From his first maturity [Shabbetai Tzvi] was peculiar, different from other youths his age – a fact which some interpret in his favor, calling him an angel rather than a human being, while others condemn him for it as a lunatic.”

*– Rabbi Avraham ben Levi Conque (1648–c. 1730)
of Hebron, a faithful follower of Shabbetai Tzvi*



Portrait of Shabbetai Tzvi, drawn in Izmir (Smyrna), 1666

THE ORIGINS OF MYSTICAL MESSIANISM

To truly fathom the incomprehensible Shabbetai Tzvi episode, first one must have an understanding of its origins in Kabbala and Jewish mystical tradition. The study of Kabbala had historically not focused on Messianism or on the process of Jewish redemption from the *galut*, the exile from Jerusalem that began after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, which was followed by the wide dispersion of Jews across the known world. For hundreds of years the study of Kabbala was mainly concerned with the mystical and symbolic view of the universe and its creation, and on understanding God and how to connect with God through the performance of commandments found in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Oral Law.

The early kabbalists – small, secretive groups of Jewish mystics – saw the concept of messianic redemption in much the same way as did non-kabbalists: a firm belief in an ultimate moment in time, when a Messiah chosen by God would lead the Jews back to the Holy Land, at which point the Temple would be rebuilt. It was an essential part of the Jewish belief system, but it was not considered particularly mystical.

After the dramatic expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, this paradigm shifted. The upheaval caused by the Spanish Expulsion, and by the Inquisition that followed in its wake, shook the Jewish world to its foundations, probably more than any other event since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple 1,400 years earlier. During the sixteenth century, Safed (Tzfat), a small community in the northeast of *Eretz Yisrael* – then under Ottoman rule – emerged as the headquarters of Kabbala in the Jewish world. Its emergence proved to be pivotal, particularly as the Kabbala espoused by Safed kabbalists was mainly eschatological in theme and content. Eschatology is the branch of theology concerned with the “end of days.”

Some of Judaism’s greatest minds and most spiritual of souls found their home in sixteenth-century Safed, and to this day the principal mystical and legal texts of Judaism can be traced to these Safed kabbalists. The greatest of these kabbalists, and the one with the broadest influence, was Rabbi Yitzhak Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572), who later became known as the Arizal or the Ari. The Arizal had a close and devoted circle of disciples who recorded all his teachings. He never wrote

anything down himself, and everything we know of him and his teachings emanates from these disciples, mainly via a mystic called Rabbi Hayim Vital (1542–1620).

The Arizal's kabbalistic system – today referred to as Lurianic Kabbala – revolved almost exclusively around this previously overlooked topic of exile and redemption. In the most basic of terms, it posited that the whole of creation was directly tied into the exile and eventual redemption of the Jewish nation. In summary, God can only allow for the existence of a physical world through an act of withdrawal. The calibration of “withdrawal” and “God” within creation is the balance between spiritual and unspiritual, or physical, in the universe.

The sin of Adam and Eve created a state of imbalance, in need of *tikkun*, or correction. The exile of the Jewish people in the physical world is a reflection of this imbalance. If the Jewish nation achieves ultimate perfection, as reflected through messianic redemption, then all of creation can at last be in balance, and God will have realized His original purpose for creation.

Interestingly, the Arizal did not devote much attention to the Messiah himself. Who he would be, what he might do or say, and how he might reveal himself, seemed of little relevance to the Arizal. But among the few scattered references within Lurianic mysticism that discuss the Messiah figure one in particular is worth noting. The Arizal predicted that the messianic redeemer would possess an “evil side,” and in the course of his activities the Messiah would perform actions or be involved in events that might seem antithetical to his messianic mission.

One fascinating example of this idea can be found in a text from the 1550s, authored by an anonymous rabbi who was part of the Safed kabbalist group. He discusses how frequently some biblical heroes were somehow connected with “inappropriate” women: Judah and Tamar, Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, Moses and Zipporah, Joshua and Rahab, Samson and Delilah, Boaz and Ruth. The text offers a number of explanations and interpretations – for example, the necessity for God's chosen hero to have a relationship with those whom God needs to vanquish; or another one: the need for a male, representing good, to effect *tikkun* on a female, representing evil; or another one: through a union of two disparate elements from opposite ends of the spectrum

God can realize the purpose of creation. Shabbetai Tzvi's apologists would later use these ideas to justify his peculiar behavior and public desecration of Jewish law.

Lurianic Kabbala's focus on the redemption had the effect of generating a new enthusiasm for the Messianic Era and heightened expectation for its imminence in the Jewish world, in a way that had not been seen since Bar Kokhba's tantalizing rise and devastating defeat by the Romans at Betar in 135 CE. There was a sudden proliferation of Jewish groups devoted to bringing about the redemption, and between 1630 and 1660 the sense of an impending redemption was promoted and discussed in many different communities.

THE EARLY LIFE OF SHABBETAI TZVI

Let us turn now to the protagonist of our story: the messianic pretender, Shabbetai Tzvi. His biography is unsurprisingly full of contradictions. Glorified by acolytes, and vilified by detractors, the truth about him is hard to pin down. But some of the facts are incontrovertible. He was born on August 1, 1626, which that year was also the Ninth of Av, Tisha B'Av, when Jews fast and spend the day mourning the destruction of the two Jerusalem Temples. But there was no fast or mourning on the day Shabbetai Tzvi was born, as it was a Saturday and fasting is prohibited on the Jewish Sabbath. Mystical literature is insistent that the Messiah will be born on Tisha B'Av, to signal that final redemption will emerge out of the ashes of destruction. In any event, it was in honor of the day of his birth – in Hebrew, *Shabbat* – that the parents of the newborn boy named their son Shabbetai.

Shabbetai Tzvi was born in the town of Izmir, in Turkey, known in those days as Smyrna. His family was originally from Greece, but his father, Mordechai, had moved the family to the coastal city to more easily and profitably conduct his international trading business. It is possible that the family was of Ashkenazic origin, as Tzvi is not a typical Sephardic family name. Mordechai Tzvi was a trading agent, acting on behalf of English traders who lived in Izmir. This type of arrangement was very common – Western European traders would hire local Jews to act for them, as they generally spoke multiple languages and were extremely well connected.

Shabbetai was the second of three sons, and his family was wealthy, prosperous, and prominent. Both his parents died before the Messiah saga – his father in 1663, his mother many years earlier. Shabbetai's main teacher was a man called Rabbi Yosef Escapa (1572–1662), author of a halakhic work titled *Rosh Yosef*. The young Shabbetai was an earnest and competent student who mastered Talmud and Jewish law at an early age, and he was just eighteen when he received his rabbinic ordination.

No one knows exactly when Shabbetai Tzvi first started studying Kabbala but it was certainly at a young age. Evidently, he studied it on his own, which was highly unusual. Aspiring kabbalists are expected to master their subject with guidance from a mentor – hence the term Kabbala, or “received” teachings.

At twenty, Shabbetai Tzvi married for the first time, but the marriage was never consummated and shortly after the wedding, following a complaint to local rabbis by his new wife's father, the young couple divorced. Almost immediately Shabbetai Tzvi married again, but once again the marriage was not consummated and ended in divorce. At around the same time people began to notice that Shabbetai Tzvi's behavior was erratic and unpredictable. Sometimes he was enthusiastically joyful, exuberant, and ecstatic, while at other times he was depressed, anxious, paranoid, and passive. Today we recognize these wild mood swings as symptoms of acute manic depression, or bipolar syndrome, but in the seventeenth century such symptoms were interpreted somewhat differently. To Shabbetai Tzvi's detractors his behavior was evidence that he was an evil madman. To his supporters and devotees, however, his strange behavior attested to the fact that he was a divine and holy man. Shabbetai Tzvi told people that he regularly experienced visions and he would often stay awake for days at a time without food. Occasionally he would disappear for weeks at a time, and no one knew where he had gone. Despite these strange disappearances, his supporters refused to acknowledge that there was anything wrong with him and instead claimed that he needed time on his own to atone for the world's sins.

One of the most unusual aspects of his manic episodes was his transformation from a meticulously observant Jew into a flagrant violator of Jewish law. His supporters would later refer to his public violations of halakha as “*maasim zarim*” – strange or paradoxical acts.

Notwithstanding the support for Shabbetai Tzvi in Izmir, his odd behavior eventually began to seriously concern the senior Jewish leadership in the town, and after an emergency meeting they decided to expel him from the community, before his malign influence began to seriously disrupt the equilibrium of the insular and conservative-minded Jewish population. The year was 1651, and Shabbetai Tzvi was twenty-five years old.

FROM OUTCAST TO REDEEMER

Before we follow Shabbetai Tzvi on his journey from Izmir, let us get to know him a little bit better. Numerous people who were acquainted with him during these wilderness years – whether they were his detractors, his supporters, or just neutral observers – would later offer their opinions and reflections on the Shabbetai Tzvi they remembered from that time, describing all the facets of his fascinating, if troubled, personality. The composite picture that emerges is mesmerizing, and remarkably consistent, despite the many different motives behind the diverse accounts.

Shabbetai Tzvi was exceptionally charming and charismatic. He was also musically talented, handsome, extremely kind and generous spirited, very diplomatic, gregarious, and a brilliant conversationalist. He was fluent in several languages, and had wide knowledge in numerous subjects. All these attributes, combined with his family's relative wealth, ensured him easy access wherever he went, enabling him to befriend anyone with whom he came into contact. Those who met him were immediately impressed, and he would easily win people over with his endearing personality and acute intelligence. Sadly, this also meant that people were blinded, at least initially, to his severe mental illness.

In any event, following his expulsion from Izmir, Shabbetai Tzvi proceeded to Salonica (Thessaloniki), in Greece, where he was received respectfully, and he soon befriended all the local rabbis. But the honeymoon in Salonica was very short-lived. Within weeks his behavior had deteriorated and he had begun to act strangely. One fateful day, Shabbetai Tzvi invited all the local rabbis to his home. They arrived to discover that he had set up a wedding canopy in his yard. As they looked on, he proceeded to perform a marriage ceremony between himself and a Torah scroll, as if he was marrying a woman. Shocked by this bizarre

behavior, they immediately arranged to have him evicted from Salonica, and he was gone within a matter of days.

From Salonica he drifted to Athens, then Peloponnese, then Patras, and finally – in 1658 – he was back in Turkey, in Constantinople (Istanbul), where he remained for several months. His strange behavior had by this time escalated exponentially. In one particularly notorious incident, he purchased an oversized dead fish, dressed it up in baby clothes, put it into a crib, and announced to startled onlookers on the street that fish represent liberation and redemption, and this particular fish was the childlike Jewish nation in need of redemption. Shortly after this bewildering episode, Shabbetai Tzvi announced that he was implementing a “festival-week ceremony.” Over the course of seven days he celebrated every major Jewish festival – High Holy Days, Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot – with all the associated laws, customs, and prayers, each day a different festival. He explained that by doing this he was atoning for all the sins committed by Jews throughout history who had done something wrong during any of these festivals, or had not observed them properly.

It was at the conclusion of this strange week that Shabbetai Tzvi announced an innovation – a blessing over sin. The blessing ended with the words “*mattir issurim*” – a corruption of the blessing recited every morning that ends “*mattir assurim*,” which describes God as “He who liberates the imprisoned.” This new blessing, to be used every time someone sinned to please God, changed the meaning of the phrase to “He who permits the forbidden.” By this stage Shabbetai Tzvi was in full manic mode and announced to the group of bewildered spectators that a new era had begun, with new laws and commandments, and by doing what he was about to do he would effect the final mystical perfection of God’s physical creation. He then took a piece of pork, uttered the altered blessing, and proceeded to eat it.

When the local community heard what he had done there was an uproar. Local rabbis were compelled to react harshly, and they arranged for Shabbetai Tzvi to be publicly flogged. He was then excommunicated and no one was permitted to speak to him, feed him, or house him. Shunned by every Jew in the city, and unable to support himself, Shabbetai Tzvi left town and returned to his birthplace, Izmir, where he disappeared from sight. He would not be seen for the next

three years. Then, in 1662, he reemerged with his confidence recovered, and departed Izmir for *Eretz Yisrael*. The trip required a stopover in Egypt, and while he was there he became very friendly with the local rabbis and community leaders, and in particular a man called Raphael Joseph, the government-appointed *chelebi* (community president) of Egyptian Jewry.

After a few months in Egypt, Shabbetai Tzvi traveled to Jerusalem, where he seems to have impressed the small community. He spent a year in Jerusalem, and the community's leaders then sent him back to Egypt as their official representative to raise funds. It was there, on March 31, 1664, that Shabbetai Tzvi got married for the third time. Sarah, his bride, was a girl with her own remarkable life story. Orphaned during the infamous Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648–49 in Poland and Ukraine, she was brought up by gentiles as a Christian. She only discovered her Jewish origins on reaching adulthood, and thereafter began drifting from community to community, possibly in search of her family – a rootless woman, very beautiful, and by all accounts very seductive.

Although Sarah had a reputation for immoral behavior, she would often make the strange claim that she was destined to marry the “Messiah,” a prediction that was the object of great amusement to everyone who knew her. Somehow she came across Shabbetai Tzvi in Egypt, and decided to marry him. The wedding took place at the home of Raphael Joseph.

THE PROPHET FROM GAZA

It was at this point that Shabbetai Tzvi stumbled across someone whose involvement in his messianic pretensions was to prove absolutely crucial – Avraham Natan ben Elisha Hayim Ashkenazi, later known to Sabbatians as Natan HaNavi (Nathan the Prophet) and to everyone else as Natan Azzati (Nathan of Gaza).

Nathan was born in approximately 1643 in Jerusalem. Despite his family being Ashkenazic – hence his last name – it was part of the Sephardic community in Jerusalem. In reality, though, Nathan's father was rarely there as he spent the vast majority of his time collecting money for the Jerusalem community in towns and cities outside *Eretz Yisrael*. Even as a young boy, Nathan was known to be

highly intelligent, extremely diligent in his studies, and he was particularly admired as a gifted writer. At the age of twenty he married the daughter of a wealthy Sephardi from Gaza and, with the promise of full financial support by his wife's father, he moved to Gaza and took up the study of Kabbala.

The change from Talmud and Jewish law to Kabbala seems to have had a profound and unsettling effect on Nathan. He withdrew from society, began to fast regularly, and engaged in intense prayer and regular ritual bathing, as well as other forms of self-mortification. Before long he informed his family and friends that he was having mystical visions and that angels appeared to him to tell him about the past, present, and future.

Like Shabbetai Tzvi, Nathan was a very talented and engaging individual, but he had many qualities that Shabbetai Tzvi did not. He was a relentless campaigner for ideals he held important; he was highly motivated and focused; and he was consistent in his Judaism – unimpeachably mitzva observant, with none of the highs and lows or aberrant behaviors of Shabbetai Tzvi; he was an original and systematic thinker, very fast on his feet; and last but not least, he was an exceptionally talented writer, which would prove critical in the messianic propaganda campaign.

Nathan would end up as the catalyst that allowed a messianic movement to flourish around the flawed character of Shabbetai Tzvi. Before he entered the picture Shabbetai Tzvi had not succeeded at anything, except for attracting attention to himself in an assortment of Jewish communities, usually for the wrong reasons. Without Nathan, Shabbetai Tzvi would probably have disappeared without a trace, confined to the trashcan of forgotten historical eccentrics who have proliferated throughout Jewish history. But that was not to be. A fateful meeting between the two of them would launch a toxic partnership that wreaked havoc across the Jewish world.

In 1665 Raphael Joseph heard about this young man in Gaza who was claiming to have spectacular visions. By this time Nathan was being visited by countless pilgrims and he had acquired a reputation as a healer. Intrigued by what he was hearing, Joseph told Shabbetai Tzvi about Nathan. Shabbetai Tzvi immediately resolved to visit this “healer” to seek help for his tormented soul. Within a few days Shabbetai Tzvi set off on a journey from Egypt to Gaza, and as soon as he arrived he arranged to meet Nathan.

The moment Shabbetai Tzvi entered his room Nathan fell to the ground in a trance. When he awoke he informed Shabbetai Tzvi that he possessed a precious and unique soul and was none other than the Messiah. Shocked by this startling revelation, Shabbetai Tzvi burst into laughter and dismissed Nathan's pronouncement as nonsense. When the meeting was over Shabbetai Tzvi began organizing to leave Gaza, but Nathan simply refused to give up. For three weeks he relentlessly cajoled Shabbetai Tzvi to accept what he was telling him and to concede that he was the King Messiah, destined to lead the Jews out of exile back to the Promised Land.

Nathan encouraged Shabbetai Tzvi to visit Jerusalem and Hebron to pray at Jewish holy sites, and accompanied him to both places, all the while badgering him to accept his mission. But when they returned to Gaza, Shabbetai Tzvi slipped into one of his periodic depressions. It was shortly before the festival of Shavuot, and on the first night of Shavuot Nathan fell into a trance in the presence of local community members and while in the trance said some amazing things about Shabbetai Tzvi. When he eventually awoke he informed everyone that he was in no doubt that Shabbetai Tzvi was the Messiah.

With the pressure now mounting, it took just one more week for Shabbetai Tzvi himself to concede, and on 17 Sivan, coinciding with May 31, 1665, for the first time Shabbetai Tzvi publicly declared himself as the Messiah, King of the Jews and Redeemer of Israel. His first act as "Messiah" was to abolish the fast of *Shiva Asar BeTammuz* (the Seventeenth of Tammuz). The decree was greeted enthusiastically in Gaza, and not only did the community feast on the fast day, they also recited Hallel and rejoiced with live music, singing, and dancing. The community in Hebron was next to join the believers. In Jerusalem, however, the story was different. The community there knew Shabbetai Tzvi, and the local rabbis were incredulous, refusing to accept that the Shabbetai Tzvi they knew so well was actually the Messiah.

Shabbetai Tzvi arrived in Jerusalem together with Nathan shortly afterward, but they were both ridiculed – every time Shabbetai Tzvi walked past a group of children they would mockingly chant at him, "He left as a *shaliah* (charity collector) and he returned as the *Mashiah* (Messiah)!" Shabbetai Tzvi tried to gain entry to the Temple Mount to bring a sacrifice but was prevented from doing so by the Ottoman authorities. A fight then erupted between him and the local Jewish leadership,

who accused him of having misappropriated some of the monies he had collected in Egypt on behalf of the community. The case was brought to the local Ottoman leader for adjudication, and Shabbetai Tzvi was exonerated. His supporters immediately claimed that the legal victory was a miracle and proved he was the Messiah.

But very quickly afterward, Shabbetai Tzvi was in trouble again. At a party celebrating his victory he personally cooked and served non-kosher meat and recited the “*mattir issurim*” benediction. Nathan’s teacher and former mentor, the highly regarded Rabbi Yaakov Hagiz, called together the local rabbis. They unanimously decided to excommunicate both Shabbetai Tzvi and Nathan, and the defiant duo were unceremoniously expelled from the Holy City. They left without putting up a fight and were never to return.

The rabbis of Jerusalem were not satisfied with a mere expulsion. Extremely concerned by the actions of the two intoxicated fraudsters, as well as by the behavior of their awestruck supporters and the possible repercussions of the messianic campaign, they wrote dozens of letters to rabbis in Jewish communities across the world to warn them of the dangers posed by this lethal duo, and to inform them about what had transpired during their time in Jerusalem. But despite the ease with which they had managed to dispatch Shabbetai Tzvi and Nathan from their own jurisdiction, putting a stop to the growing messianic movement would prove to be completely beyond their grasp.

ON A MESSIANIC MISSION

After their eviction from Jerusalem, Shabbetai Tzvi and Nathan decided that they would split up. While Shabbetai Tzvi embarked on a tour of Jewish communities, to introduce himself to as many people as possible so that he could create a wide base of support among the general Jewish public, Nathan launched a propaganda campaign, using correspondence with leading players across the Jewish world as a door opener for Shabbetai Tzvi wherever he went.

Nathan returned to Gaza – which he declared the new holy city of Judaism – while Shabbetai Tzvi headed toward Izmir. On his way he stopped at any town or city that had a Jewish community. The news of his messianic declaration traveled ahead of him and he was enthusiastically

welcomed wherever he went. And although his behavior remained erratic and unusual, the enthusiasm generated by the belief that he was the Messiah seemed to render any aberration irrelevant – whether he behaved normally or strangely, his personal conduct was completely overshadowed by the euphoric feelings of the thousands of Jews who believed he had come to liberate them from exile.

Meanwhile, as Shabbetai Tzvi zigzagged triumphantly from community to community, Nathan launched a feverish propaganda campaign. In numerous letters dispatched to every major Jewish center he called for mass repentance in anticipation of the imminent redemption. He began to refer to Shabbetai Tzvi as “AMIRAH”: “*Adoneinu Malkeinu Yarum Hodo*” – “Our lord, our king, may his majesty be exalted.” His flowery predictions for the great redemption and how it would unfold became more fanciful with each letter. His “prophecies” were apocalyptic and supernatural. A blazing fire would surround Jerusalem and Hebron, he wrote, to prevent any uncircumcised gentiles from entering these holy places. Mosques and churches would spontaneously disappear without a trace. These bizarre predictions were lapped up by the masses, as fact and fiction became indistinguishable. With hindsight, it is evident that the entire movement had set itself up for crushing failure from very early on.

Shabbetai Tzvi arrived in Izmir in September 1665 and stayed there for four months. He secluded himself upon arrival and rarely emerged. Throughout his time there, letters from supporters and detractors piled up at the homes of local rabbis and leaders. Two distinct groups emerged – those who enthusiastically believed in him and those who emphatically did not. At the head of the unbelievers was the chief rabbi of the city, Rabbi Hayim Benveniste, acclaimed author of the authoritative halakhic work *Knesset HaGedola*.

Tension in the city mounted but remained under control until, on Saturday, December 12, 1665, Shabbetai Tzvi led a mob of supporters to the Portuguese synagogue, where he disrupted the service and read the Torah portion from a printed book instead of the Torah scroll. He announced that he was appointing one of his brothers the new sultan of Turkey, and his other brother the emperor of Rome. While everyone looked on disbelievingly, he began to hurl insults at the local community rabbis, including Rabbi Benveniste.

Suddenly he changed the subject. “Why has Jesus been so abused by Jewish tradition?” he asked disparagingly, and then declared that under his leadership Jesus would henceforth be considered one of the Jewish prophets. He performed a number of strange rituals and then announced to the astonished worshipers that the date of the redemption was 15 Sivan, 1666. At this point Rabbi Benveniste stood up and demanded that Shabbetai Tzvi prove to everyone that he was the Messiah, as he claimed. Shabbetai Tzvi sneered and began hurling vile insults at the rabbi, threatening him with excommunication. The synagogue erupted in complete pandemonium as Shabbetai Tzvi screamed abuse and the rabbi’s supporters screamed back at him.

Inexplicably, within a matter of days Rabbi Benveniste reconciled with Shabbetai Tzvi, and he suddenly became one of the impostor’s most ardent supporters. Rabbi Benveniste was a man with a stellar reputation, both as a pious Jew and as a wise and learned rabbi, and his declaration of support was a turning point in the messianic campaign, as numerous doubters changed sides and began to support Shabbetai Tzvi. In response to Rabbi Benveniste’s decision to back him, Shabbetai Tzvi arranged for a rival local rabbi to be fired and began to treat Rabbi Benveniste with great respect. Now led by their chief rabbi, Izmir’s Jewish community erupted with messianic fervor, and those unbelievers who remained skeptical were utterly marginalized. Sadly, the respected rabbi’s support for the charlatan Messiah continued throughout the remainder of the nine-month episode, a tragic miscalculation that stained his reputation until his passing and which continued to haunt his legacy even after his death.

In Gaza, Nathan continued his energetic campaign to promote the redemption. Believers began to proliferate throughout the Jewish world. The legend soon began to feed on itself – the more people there were who believed that Shabbetai Tzvi was the Messiah, the more ambassadors there were for the cause. With the excitement growing, and the anticipation increasing, Shabbetai Tzvi and his acolytes decided it was time to inform the Ottoman authorities, and in particular the Sultan, about his messianic mission and to request their full cooperation.

In early 1666, Shabbetai Tzvi set sail for Constantinople. Rough seas disrupted the ten-day journey, and the ship floundered at sea for

more than a month. Meanwhile, the news of his imminent appearance in the Ottoman capital created a massive stir, and the Jewish-community leadership struggled to formulate a cogent strategy. While some of them believed it was possible that Shabbetai Tzvi was indeed who he claimed to be, acknowledging him as Messiah, King of the Jews, was a treasonable offense, punishable by imprisonment or possibly even execution. But what if he was the Messiah? Not welcoming him would be a blatant denial of his elevated status and would amount to a terrible dishonor and a desecration of God's name. Meanwhile, there were those in the community who utterly refused to believe the messianic claims, and there were some who even urged the community's leaders to arrange for Shabbetai Tzvi to be assassinated.

While all this was being deliberated in Constantinople, such was the power of the propaganda emanating from Gaza and Izmir that Jews as far away as Germany, Holland, Poland, and North Africa were selling their businesses and wrapping up their affairs as they prepared for the imminent redemption and their return to Zion. The scene was set for a dramatic climax.

MESSIANIC MISSION ABORTED

By this time, the Turkish authorities had caught wind of the affair and an emergency meeting was called between government officials and the Jewish leadership to decide what to do. After examining the evidence, and based on first-hand accounts of the pretender's personal history, the authorities and Jewish leaders concluded that Shabbetai Tzvi was an impostor and determined that he had to be stopped in his tracks. As a result of this decision, when Shabbetai Tzvi's ship drew close to Constantinople on February 5, 1666, a group of Turkish soldiers sailed up to his vessel before it docked, unceremoniously arrested him, and escorted him to shore.

The arrest marked the end of the messianic adventure in practical terms, and Shabbetai Tzvi was taken into custody. Unsure what to do with this unlikely revolutionary leader, the authorities decided that the grand vizier, Köprülüzade Fazil Ahmed Pasha, would take personal charge of the case. Shabbetai Tzvi did not present a military threat to the Ottomans, and it seems no one was too concerned by his political

ambitions either. As far as the Ottoman authorities were concerned, the main problem posed by the eccentric rabbi and his following was economic. With Jews in control of so many trade routes, the potential disruption to Turkey's trade and industry as a result of the religious awakening provoked by this furor was of grave concern, and the grand vizier understood that this matter needed careful and delicate handling.

In the meantime Shabbetai Tzvi was treated benignly, a fact misconstrued by his supporters as further proof that he was the Messiah. He was kept in a comfortable suite at the local prison, and friends and supporters were permitted to visit him in a constant stream. Shortly before Passover, Shabbetai Tzvi was transported just under two hundred miles to a fortress across the water from Gallipoli. Thousands of believers traveled from all over the world to catch a glimpse of their Messiah. So great was the influx of pilgrims that local food prices began to rise, and boat owners were able to charge exorbitant rates to ferry believers to the prison fortress and back. The surreal pantomime persisted for several months and, although the declared date of redemption came and went, the hysteria continued unabated.

On the fast of *Shiva Asar BeTammuz*, Shabbetai Tzvi ate heartily, and so did his supporters. During the traditional three weeks of mourning that followed the fast, Shabbetai Tzvi announced he was canceling the fast of Tisha B'Av, a decision hailed by his followers as a new high point of the redemptive era. But by now people were beginning to realize that things were not going as planned, and nothing seemed to match Nathan's ever-escalating predictions and "prophecies." One did not need to be particularly perceptive to see that Shabbetai Tzvi had failed to lead the Jews to redemption. In fact, he wasn't even getting out of jail. In addition, there were worrying reports emerging from the jail of his involvement with various young women who were being supplied to him by the prison staff on a regular basis.

The sultan of Turkey, who had been receiving reports from his grand vizier about the strange prisoner and his following, decided that the matter needed to be addressed once and for all, before it got completely out of hand. In September, without any warning, Shabbetai Tzvi was suddenly spirited away to Adrianople, where the sultan resided during the summer months. As soon as he arrived he was brought to the

palace for an audience with the sultan, who was joined by a group of senior advisers, as well as the royal physician, a Jewish convert to Islam.

Questioned about his messianic pretensions, Shabbetai Tzvi denied that he was the Messiah, claiming it was all an elaborate fabrication. When it was pointed out to him that an enthusiastic messianic movement had developed around him, and that the movement was in danger of escalating into a rebellion against Ottoman rule, he shrugged his shoulders dismissively and did not offer any comment. One of the sultan's advisers mentioned that he had heard Shabbetai Tzvi was a miracle worker, and requested that he perform a miracle for them, but the bashful Messiah tactfully declined.

The apostate royal physician then told him in no uncertain terms that there was only one solution to the crisis – Shabbetai Tzvi's immediate conversion to Islam. If he refused, the sultan would have no choice but to have him executed on the spot on the grounds that he was a dangerous revolutionary. Shabbetai Tzvi did not hesitate for a moment. He tore off his Jewish cap and spat on it, and to everyone's surprise began speaking viciously against the Jewish faith. A Muslim cleric was quickly summoned to convert him, and the conversion was performed there and then, witnessed by the sultan and all his advisers.

After the conversion was over, the sultan presented Shabbetai Tzvi with a special turban and formally changed his name to Aziz Mehemed Effendi. He was appointed keeper of the palace gates and awarded a generous government-funded salary. Those who were present at the meeting later reported that both Shabbetai Tzvi and the sultan appeared delighted by their meeting, and they parted in very good spirits.

The news of Shabbetai Tzvi's conversion was greeted with astonishment. At first it was dismissed as lies. For believers it was inconceivable that their Messiah would choose apostasy over martyrdom, while critics could not believe that the sultan had allowed such a dangerous revolutionary to remain alive. Confusion reigned. As time went by, and Jews in Adrianople witnessed the newly turbaned Shabbetai Tzvi manning the palace gates, the news of his apostasy began to spread across the Jewish world, and so began a long and tortured journey back to normality for the masses of Jews who had been animated by this eccentric pretender, a man who had proven to be nothing more than a disappointing fraud.

FALSE MESSIAH DIES – HIS MISSION DOES NOT

Shabbetai Tzvi lived on for another ten years. At times he assumed the role of a pious Muslim and criticized Judaism; at other times he associated with Jews and acted as a Jew. In March 1668 he let it be known that God had appeared to him in a prophetic vision and revealed that he was still the true Messiah, in spite of his conversion, and that his conversion had been a holy act meant to attract Muslims to Judaism as part of the redemption process.

This statement and other peculiar acts were too much for the authorities to tolerate. Shabbetai Tzvi was fired from his palace job, his salary was terminated, and he was banished to a Muslim district of Constantinople, with strict instructions not to interact with the Jewish community. But it seems he was unable to stay out of trouble. Within a short period he was discovered leading Jewish prayer groups, resulting in his immediate exile to a small coastal village in Montenegro. There he died in total isolation, supposedly on September 17, 1676, which coincided with Yom Kippur. He was hastily buried by the local authorities in an unmarked grave, and his burial site remains unknown.

The vast majority of those who had believed that he was the Messiah rejected him as soon as they found out about his conversion to Islam. There was, however, a significant group which tenaciously clung to his messianic promises, finding convoluted kabbalistic explanations to prove that the conversion was part of the grand messianic scheme. Most prominent among those believers was Nathan of Gaza, who spent the remainder of his life traveling around the world, shoring up belief in the Muslim Messiah, even after he had died.

In 1680, Nathan suddenly died at the age of thirty-seven in Skopje, Macedonia. Despite the death of the movement's main life force, belief in Shabbetai Tzvi and the mystical teachings he had espoused persisted for well over a century, and it wasn't until the end of the 1700s, and only after numerous notorious and bitter battles, that the remnants of Shabbetai Tzvi's messianic movement finally disappeared from mainstream Jewish life, bringing to an end one of the strangest episodes of modern Jewish history.