

The Schizophrenic FRAUD

How Shabtai Svi Fooled a Nation

YEHUDA AZOULAY

Having endured expulsions, persecution and the horrors of massive pogroms, the Jewish nation was particularly vulnerable – both physically and spiritually. It was the mid-17th century and anticipation of Mashiah's imminent arrival was at a high, leaving an entire nation susceptible to the sinister ego of a mentally unstable, yet intellectually gifted, demagogue.

During his infamous, 18-year career as a pseudo-messiah, Shabtai Svi wreaked havoc on Jewish communities throughout the world – first tearing them apart with heretical teachings, and then spectacularly betraying their belief in him. But although his deception shook their spirits to the very core, ultimately, the Shabtai Svi episode proved that nothing could shatter the foundations of traditional Jewish faith.

The Peculiar Prodigy

Shabtai Svi was born in Smyrna, Turkey in the year 1626. His father, Mordechai, was a successful merchant from Morea¹, Greece and a descendant of Jewish exiles from Spain.

Shabtai was a gifted child and an outstanding student with a photographic memory, and he received rabbinic ordination before the age of twenty. He attended a yeshiva under the guidance of Rabbi Yosef Escapa, studying all areas of Torah, including halacha and Gemara. His primary field of interest, however, was Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). Shabtai allegedly used practical Kabbalah as a means of communicating with Hashem and angels, predicting the future and performing miracles. Shabtai would later make use of Kabbalah in advancing his messianic claims.

At the age of twenty, Shabtai began to exhibit unusual behaviors, occasionally falling into deep depression and consigning himself to isolation. He felt compelled to eat non-kosher food,



and speak the forbidden name of Hashem, and commit other grave sins. He fasted on certain occasions, meditated, lived alone for long periods of time, and engaged in peculiar acts of self-affliction.

Despite his strange conduct, his impressive intelligence and vast knowledge helped him maintain respected status as a rabbi and accomplished scholar of Kabbalah for several more years.

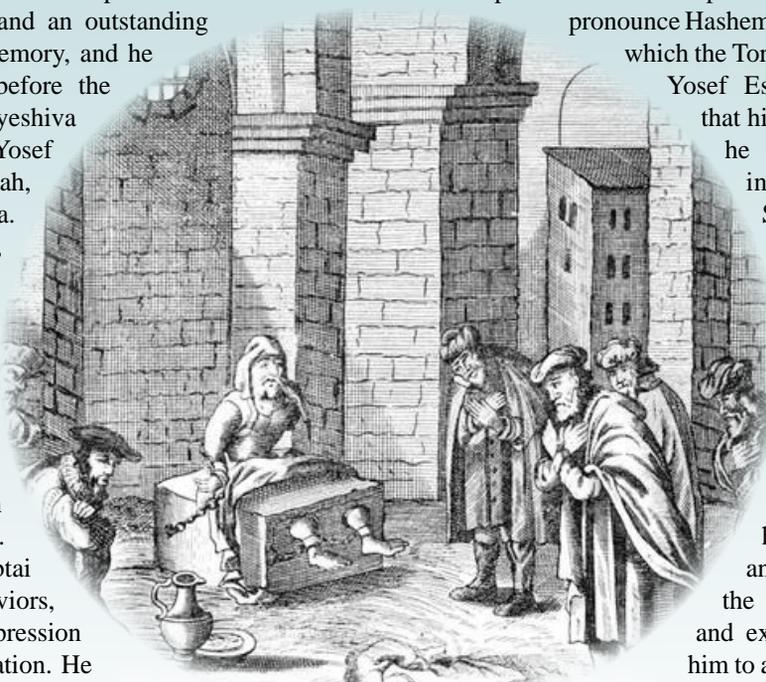
In 1648, at the age of twenty-two, perhaps after hearing of the horrors of the Chmielnicki² pogroms, Shabtai began envisioning himself as the savior of the Jewish people. He officially, but privately, declared to his followers that he was Mashiah and among the first steps he undertook to “prove” his messiahship was to publicly

pronounce Hashem's unspoken name in vain – an act which the Torah strictly prohibits. When Rabbi

Yosef Escapa, Shabtai's teacher, heard that his student claimed to be Mashiah, he put Shabtai and his followers in herem (excommunication).

Several years later, in 1651³, as his aberrant religious practices became more notorious, the sages of Smyrna banished Shabtai from the community.

He spent the next seven years wandering through Greece, Turkey and Albania, and over the course of his travels, many Jewish communities expelled him due to his unusual behavior and peculiar ideology. Yet, despite the strong opposition, his charisma and extraordinary scholarship enabled him to attract a relatively large following of ardent supporters.



Shabtai Tzvi as a prisoner of the Turks in Abydos.

Published in the 1901-1906 Jewish Encyclopedia,

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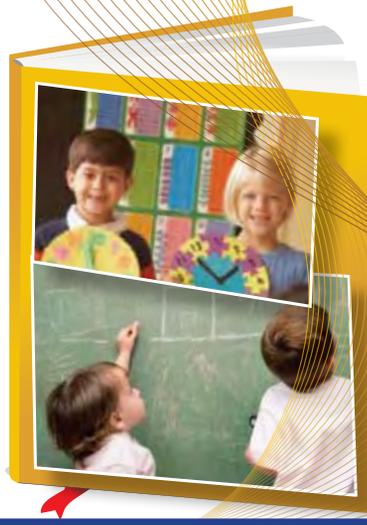
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however, he traveled to many different cities, eventually settling in Cairo for about two years. There Shabtai befriended a wealthy individual named Rephael Joseph Halabi, who became a supporter.

In 1663, Shabtai Svi moved to Jerusalem. The community of Jerusalem at the time was in dire need of funds to pay the exorbitant taxes imposed by the Turkish government. Shabtai's close ties to Halabi in the Turkish government center of Cairo led to his appointment as the community's envoy to appeal to the philanthropist for financial support. He succeeded in obtaining the funds needed to pay the Turkish authorities, which served to bolster his reputation as a Jewish savior.

On his way to Jerusalem, Shabtai passed through the city of Gaza, where he met a man called Natan of Gaza⁴, a reputed Kabbalist and Talmudic scholar.⁵ Natan concluded that Shabtai Svi was the Messiah and that he, Natan, was chosen to be Shabtai's prophet. He convinced Shabtai that the time had come to reveal himself publicly to the Jewish people.

Natan had a major impact on Shabtai's mission and before long, scores of "official" proclamations, written letters, and stories of Shabtai's alleged miracles and heroic acts spread like wildfire throughout the Jewish world. The Jews of Jerusalem, however, did not accept Shabtai's claims, and he was forced to leave the city. After traveling through several cities, he ended up returning to Smyrna in 1666.⁶

Shabtai's Rise to Fame and Infamy

Despite the herem and banishment, Shabtai gradually earned widespread fame amongst all sorts of Jews. The events of the previous one hundred and fifty years – the expulsions, the pogroms and the Inquisition – made many eager to believe in Mashiah's imminent arrival, and many thus celebrated Shabtai's messianic claims as heralding the long-awaited redemption.

In 1658, Shabtai traveled with his disciples to Constantinople (then the capital of the Ottoman Empire; the city is known today as Istanbul), where he met Abraham Ha-Yakini (a disciple of R' Yosef di Trani – Maharit), who would establish Shabtai's messianic mission. Ha-Yakini is said to have forged a rare manuscript in archaic characters called "The Great Wisdom of Solomon," which he hoped would corroborate Shabtai's messianic claims.

Shabtai chose Salonica, at the time a center of Kabbalistic study, as his base from which to disseminate his teachings. Later,

News of "Mashiah's" arrival reached Europe, Asia, North Africa and even the New World. Throughout many countries, Jews began selling their homes and businesses in preparation for their trip to the Holy Land. Even wealthy Marrano communities were gripped by messianic fervor. Jewish trading practically stopped, and the obsession with Shabtai Svi on the part of so many Jewish merchants crippled the European economy. Property values fell, and the Dutch fleet was monopolized by Jews waiting to sail to the Holy Land. Jews in many places around the world watched and waited to see what would happen next.

A righteous Jewish woman in Germany named Gluckel of Hamelin⁷ wrote memoirs that provide insight into the life of European Jewry in the seventeenth century. Her account of the Shabtai Svi period gives us a sense of the scope and intensity of the messianic fervor that swept the Jewish world:

About this time people began to talk of Shabtai Svi. But woe unto us that we have sinned and never lived to see what we had heard

and I believed... Throughout the world servants and children rent themselves with repentance, prayer, and charity for two, yea, for three years my beloved people Israel sat in labor but there came forth naught but wind...

Our joy when the letters arrive from Smyrna is not to behold. Most of them were addressed to Sephardim. As fast as they came, they took the letters to the synagogue and read them aloud. Young and old, the Germans, too, hastened to the Sephardic synagogues...

Many sold their houses and lands and all their possessions for the day they hoped to be redeemed. My good father-in-law left his home in Hamelin, abandoned his house and lands and all of his goodly furniture...⁸

Rabbinical Support

Many prominent rabbis were misinformed about Shabtai Svi, and supported his movement. Among the rabbis who supported the false messiah were Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, Moses Rephael de Aguilar, Moses Galante, Moses Zacuto and Hayim Benveniste. Among the few rabbis who fiercely opposed the popular belief in Shabtai Svi was Rabbi Yaakov Sasportas. Warning against lending support to the false Mashiah, Rabbi Sasportas wrote lengthy letters to all the prominent rabbis of Europe. Sadly, Rabbi Sasportas' warnings fell upon deaf ears, and he was forced to leave his hometown of Amsterdam.

In 1666, Shabtai left Smyrna for Constantinople. Natan of Gaza had prophesied that Sabbatai would place the Sultan's crown on his own head, and Shabtai announced his plan to march to Jerusalem and liberate the Holy City. He also wanted the Sultan to hand over to him the land of Israel, but when the grand vizier, Ahmed Koprulu (Sultan) of Turkey, heard of Shabtai's plans, he decided that Shabtai had gone too far. He ordered Shabbatai's immediate arrest upon his arrival in the capital city, and had him imprisoned.

Shabtai's Downfall

Shabtai's imprisonment did not deter his followers. Natan of Gaza and his disciples spread enchanting stories of the miracles which Shabtai was performing in the Turkish capital. In fact, messianic expectations seemed to have risen with Shabtai's move to Constantinople. Shabtai enjoyed a large measure of freedom during his "imprisonment," which may have been secured by means of bribes. He dressed like an emperor, and received guests and lavish gifts. Essentially, he lived under house arrest, rather than in prison.⁹

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Concerned that the Sabbatean movement could precipitate a Jewish revolt, eventually the Sultan ordered Shabtai to convert to Islam or be tortured to death. Brought before the Sultan, Shabtai agreed to convert and he cast off his Jewish garb and donned a Turkish turban. In reward for his cooperation, Shabtai was given a royal title, Aziz Mahmed Efendi, and the position of "Keeper of the Sultan's Gate" (doorkeeper).

When news spread of Shabtai's acceptance of Islam, the majority of his followers stopped believing in his messiahship. Some, however, refused to admit their mistake and, following their messiah's example, converted to Islam.

One day, Shabtai was discovered by Turkish authorities singing Tehillim in a tent with Jews in a small village. News of Shabtai's Jewish practice reached the Sultan, and Shabtai was exiled to Dulcigno (Ulcinj), a small town in Montenegro, where he died in solitude.¹⁰ He was buried there, presumably under a false name.

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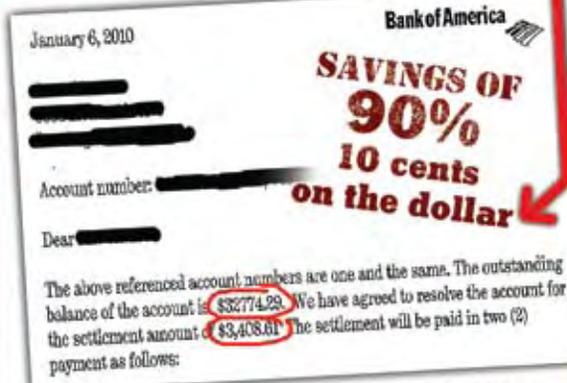
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A neo-Sabbatean group called Donmeh West was founded in California in 1972 under the leadership of Yaakov LeB HaKohain whose family originates from Constantinople. Over 100,000 visitors have come to read and listen to Yaakov Leib HaKohain's teachings and some consider him the leader of a worldwide revival of neo-Sabbatean Kabbalah.

Discovering Today's Sabbateans

Aubrey Ross, an Orthodox Jew from London, conducted extensive research on modern Sabbateans, culminating in the publication of the book, *The Messiah of Turkey*. Among Ross's discoveries was a private university in Istanbul, Turkey, which he claims was founded by the Karakash group of Donmeh. Ross writes:

I discovered there are 50 'ogans' – spiritual leaders – of the Sabbatean movement. They have trained in twelve Kabbalistic colleges in Turkey, which are underground. They are experts in the Zohar, in Sefer Bahir and Sefer Yessira, prominent Kabbalistic works which are accepted and respected by Orthodox Jews, but not revered (to the same extent). They also know the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets and other writings, but very little or no Talmud as this had been transcended by Shabbtai Svi.

It's like a well-known secret. But the Sabbateans don't want to be exposed. I have been asked by four members of the community not to publish my book. They fear reactions from extreme Islamic elements.

A Misguided Legacy Lives On

Even after Shabtai's death, approximately three hundred families¹¹ that had converted to Islam and were known as Donmeh (Turkish for "converts") stubbornly continued to believe that he would reappear and redeem the Jewish people. These Donmeh followers were unable abandon the belief they had embraced for so many years. The Donmeh tradition has survived and continues even today. Most of today's Donmeh followers live in Turkey as Muslims, but continue to follow so called Sabbateanism.

More than half a century after Shabtai's death, a man by the name of Jacob Frank¹² declared that he was a reincarnation of Shabtai Svi. He claimed to have mystical powers and preached against the sages and Talmud. He was confronted by the Polish authorities, and he later converted to Catholicism in the presence of King Augustus III of Poland, together with groups of his Jewish supporters, who are known as "Frankists."

Jews of Salonika do penance for following the pseudo-messiah Shabbtai Tzvi



Sabbateans' Star of David symbol



Ross believes that there are a number of secret Sabbateans who hold key positions of influence in the Turkish government, including the foreign minister himself.

Though hidden remnants of his legacy may remain, the most significant and enduring effect of the Shabtai Svi episode was the spiritual immunization of the Jewish people from the false claims of future pretenders – and at the same time, a strengthening of their longing for the true Mashiah, may he come speedily in our day.

Sources:

Marc Baer, Donmeh; Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries and Secular Turks.

Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism.

Aubrey Ross, The Messiah of Turkey.

Endnotes

1. Morea was the name of the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece during the Middle Ages and the early modern period.
2. In 1648, a Ukrainian officer Bogdan Chmielnicki, with the support of the Tatar Khan of Crimea, roused the local peasants to fight together with him and the Russian Orthodox Cossacks against the Jews. The first wave of violence in 1648 destroyed Jewish communities east of the Dnieper River. Following the violence, thousands of Jews fled west, across the river, to the major cities. The Cossacks and the peasants followed them; the first large-scale massacre took place at Nemirov (a small town, which is part of present-day Ukraine). It is estimated that 100,000-200,000 Jews died in the Chmielnicki uprising that lasted from 1648-1649. This wave of destruction is considered the first modern pogrom.
3. According to other sources, this occurred in 1654.
4. Natan Benjamin ben Elisha ha-Levi Ghazzati (1643–1680).
5. Natan studied in the Bet Yaakov Yeshiva and was one of Rabbi Yaakov Hagiz's foremost students.
6. Rabbi Yaakov Hagiz declared a *herem* on Shabtai Svi. He and his followers were banished from Jerusalem in Av, 1664/5424.
7. Gluckel of Hamelin (1646 – 1724) was a distinguished Jewish businesswoman and diarist, whose account of her life provides scholars with a vivid portrait of Jewish life in Germany in the late seventeenth-early eighteenth century.
8. The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln, New York: Schocken Books, 1997, pp. 46-47.
9. Shabtai Svi was later taken to the state prison at Abydos.
10. The circumstances surrounding his death are shrouded in mystery, and there are many different accounts of his passing. In *Sefer Minhat Yehuda HaRuhot Mesaperot* (The Spirits Speak), in the section of Yehezkel, it is told that Shabtai Svi appeared to Hacham Yehuda Fetaya as a demonic spirit. Shabtai Svi told Hacham Fetaya, "I am he, Shabtai Svi. My death was by hanging. I did not repent for my sins..."
11. Most of those remaining descendants currently live in Turkey.
12. Jacob Frank (1726–1791) was an 18th century Jewish leader who claimed to be the reincarnation of Shabtai Svi, and also of King David.

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