

‘Should Napoleon Be Victorious...’:
Politics and Spirituality in Early Modern
Jewish Messianism

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Should Napoleon be victorious, wealth among the Jews will be abundant and the glory of the children of Israel will be exalted. But the hearts of Israel will be separated and distanced from their father in heaven. But if our master Alexander will triumph, though poverty will be abundant and the glory of Israel will be humbled, the heart of Israel will be bound and joined with its father in heaven.

Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, 1812

Can we establish how political and spiritual orientations and agendas of Jewish messianism relate in the early modern period? For this period, the internal discourse on the messianism of post-conversion Sabbateanism in Frankism and Hasidism have been well analyzed. Are there developments, external to the Jewish community, that in this period particularly encroach on Jewish life, and which influence the political and spiritual dimensions of messianism?

Michel Foucault tells us: ‘If it moves it is political; and it is emancipatory, at that’. But both Foucault’s radical reductionism and his optimism – in relation to history and any method with which we might interpret that history – are more than problematic; and they are certainly suspect when it comes to understanding experiences and aspirations of Jews and their messianism on the eve of modernity. Can the boundaries between the political and spiritual be readily fixed? Can they be altogether blurred?

Granted, in this period, the political realm, at least as defined by the power of the state, begins to infringe considerably more upon Jews in positive and negative ways making political questions more timely, even urgent. That state now challenges such intermediary structures as the guild and the church that stood between the state’s macropolitical

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domain and the individual's microspiritual domain. That state now possesses new administrative tools and technical apparatuses for the control of individual citizens as well as the political resolve, concentrated and ready, to implement that control. Is it any wonder, therefore, that seemingly impertinent questions of the nature and implications of Jewish messianism were raised in some of those early political discourses about Jewish rights and emancipation? For the Jews themselves, some times participating in this discourse about the status of Jews and Judaism in the changing polities and societies, in other situations, avidly watching over their shoulders and speculating upon the consequences of these developments, concerns about their political future in this fluid situation may have taken on a new measure of salience influencing their messianism as well. But there was a more subtle issue in regard to these changing political structures. The questions for Jews of messianism in the early modern period, as in other periods, continued to have to do with *how* – the political and spiritual means by which that messianism transforms – but now, also, more with *where* – the social location in which eschatological beliefs would be protected from the new demands of the centralized absolutist state and could continue to be compellingly plausible.

A well known Hasidic text, the above cited letter, written by Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, reveals to us – at first glance, seemingly, in such an explicit manner – how and why he analyzed and made decisions about choosing sides at an apocalyptic moment. This epistle, pulsating with realistic assessments of the machinations of readily identifiable, thisworldly rulers, so well illustrates how not all that prompts movements primarily expresses political motivations – political at least in the sense of maximizing security and worldly benefits in relation to political rulers. It illustrates in programmatic terms the interdependence of the spiritual and political aspirations for the future – if not the actual messianism, then the responses made to a messianically charged moment by a principle and influential Hasidic thinker. It illustrates the equivocal terms of emancipation. It illustrates complexities of reading Hasidic texts. In regard to early modern messianism, 'political' and 'emancipatory' simply do not describe the fullest range of possibilities.¹

1 J. Katz, 'The term "Jewish Emancipation": Its Origin and Historical Impact', in: A. Altman (ed.), *Studies in Nineteenth-Century Jewish Intellectual History*, Cambridge, MA 1964, pp. 1–25; P. Birnbaum and I. Katznelson (eds.), *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, Princeton 1995, pp. 3–36.

A contemporary of Shneur Zalman, a man from a similar background, whose path may have crossed that of Shneur Zalman's in one Hasidic court or another is Solomon Maimon (1749-1800). He became one of our great informants about early modern East European Jewish life, including its messianism. As the promulgator and popularizer of the image of the blurry eyed and otherworldly *Ostjude* – 'if it moves, it is spiritual', he might have said – Maimon's descriptions of their milieu well illustrate the interpretive problems at the opposite extreme posited by Foucault. Solomon Maimon often neglected to pay sufficient attention to the political motives and movements of the Jews he described. Born in Lithuania, he 'emancipated' himself sufficiently from the *shtetl*, including those Hasidic courts which he frequented in his youth, to move to Berlin, to write *Versuch über die Transzendentalphilosophie* in response to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and to win Kant's attention as his leading disciple. Maimon also wrote a vastly popular autobiography, in the tradition of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. Published serially, in 1792 and 1793, in what was a coffee table publication, it became favored reading in German salon circles. Sundry *parvenus* found in Maimon's memoirs both slapstick amusement and credible confirmation for their prejudices against those who came to be known as *Ostjuden*.

His elliptic and ungenerous reading of worldly and otherworldly orientations can be found in the portraits that he presents of his own family. His grandfather, for example, was an *arendar*, a lease holder for an estate of Prince Radziwill, who came of a family known for its Calvinist attachments. The estate, in a small village on the Neman River, included houses, fields, and a tavern as well as a toll bridge. Maimon describes the dire neglect of these estates reflecting the thwarted entrepreneurialism of autarkic Poland. But Maimon ultimately attributes the neglect to his grandfather who 'could not tolerate any innovations; all matters had to be conducted in the old manner'.

Maimon tells of the comic and pathetic situation of a bridge that had fallen into disrepair longer than anyone could remember. Gentry carriages traversing the broken bridge would be damaged. The lords would quickly vent their spleen on the Jewish manager and his family. Maimon's grandfather, however, trained the family to take evasive measures. Each time a magnate's carriage would approach, the family would escape into the forest. After slaking their thirst and spilling out what would remain of the grandfather's liquor supply, the lords could avenge themselves by ransacking the house. But members of the family

would not be harassed nor wounded. Solomon Maimon asks the obvious question: Why didn't his grandfather repair the bridge? Maimon presents this as evidence for the otherworldliness and backwardness of his grandfather, his incapacity to plan, his lack of assertiveness and responsiveness to quotidian reality while waiting for the messiah. Traditional society, Maimon would lead us to believe, was as precarious as his grandfather's bridge.

The bridge was never repaired. What Maimon does not tell us is that in accordance with the standard form of the late feudal gentry-Jewish contract, capital improvements and repairs were to be at the expense of the owners who often tried to pass the responsibility on to their Jewish agents. What he may not have known is now evidenced by abundant archival documents. Otherworldly Jews, like his grandfather, often were busy battling it out in the courts with the Polish gentry, even those, like the Radziwills, imbued with the spirit of capitalism.²

In fact, if you calculate the interest rates and the rates of return on investment, you quickly realize: within the autarkic economic and political system of serfdom, Solomon Maimon's grandfather was demonstrating what might be considered higher rational economic thinking and decision making capacity. His Kantian grandson did not sufficiently appreciate the singularly significant fact: in strictly economic terms, *it did not pay to repair the broken bridge*. Foucault, narrative historians, and post-modernists of various sorts would overlook other types of movement that bolstered broken bridges. Indeed, there is evidence that what was really moving was capital; that through the unrivaled, expanded, international circles of trust and accountability that a member of Jewish civic society enjoyed, Solomon Maimon's grandfather could invest in entrepreneurialism and state building, *elsewhere*. The Court Jews of Germany and Central Europe, funding princes in the construction of consolidated and absolutist states, were at the same time venture capitalist investing on behalf of Jews in Eastern Europe.³

Maimon directs us to the questions that we must ask when trying to interpret Shneur Zalman's choice of the Tsar over Napoleon and his motivations. What other broken bridges did Jews in the early modern period confront in relationship to the disintegrating autarky with

2 S. Maimon, *Sefer Hayyei Shelomo Maimon*, tr. Y.L. Barukh, Tel-Aviv 1953, pp. 213–214.

3 H. Levine, *Economic Origins of Antisemitism: Poland and Its Jews in the Early Modern Period*, New Haven 1991; J. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750*, Oxford 1985.

which they were most familiar and the new forms of autocracy and totalitarian democracy⁴ that partitions and wars were bringing to their doorstep? How did they understand and by what criteria did they choose among the respective modes of state building and the allowance of social space for a civic society within which Jews could locate themselves and live the collective, associational lives that they desired? How did the macrostructures of modernizing, often somewhat elusive, present the background for important shifts in Jewish cognition and strategizing for their own safety and future?⁵ How were they motivated by messianism? And, perhaps most important, in the shifting demands of the state and their own desire for security, even for a modicum of participation, how did Jews seek to carve out the social space in which they could sustain the plausibility of their eschatological beliefs?

In all fairness to Foucault, it must be pointed out that his *bon mot* is not too distant from interpretative models of the late Gershom Scholem and his generalizations about Jewish messianism.⁶ If it moves, particularly, if it mobilizes a messianic movement, it is political and somewhat emancipatory. We hear echoes of this in his critique of Martin Buber who, Scholem claims, presents 'Hasidism as a spiritual phenomenon and not a historical one'.⁷

Scholem's own position is now coming under the respectful but sharp critique of a younger generation of scholars, precipitating vigorous debates in Jerusalem. Yehuda Liebes takes Scholem to task for his overemphasis of the political side of messianism. Scholem's magisterial study of the early modern messiah-claimant, Sabbatai Sevi, for example, makes Sabbatai Sevi's plan sound too 'similar to Herzl's charter'. Liebes claims that in reviewing thousands of pages of Sabbatean

4 J. Talmon, *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy*, Boston 1952.

5 In Moses Mendelssohn, the icon of *Aufklärung* for Jews and Germans of his time, we find similar misreadings of the political macrostructure. He overstated the good intention of autocratic rulers. In the 1770s, fashionably scientific concepts of the indicators of mortal death were used to criticize and intervene in the communal life of Jews. Mendelssohn tried to defend specific Jewish interests in practice. But he sided with the autocratic rulers in regard to the quality of their science as well as the legitimacy of their intervention into the internal domain of Jewish life, what might be considered civic society. See: A. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, Alabama 1973, pp. 288–295.

6 G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York 1971.

7 G. Scholem, 'Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism', *Commentary*, XXII (1961), pp. 305–316; idem, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

texts, he found 'virtually no trace to the idea of political and national redemption'.⁸ He acknowledges traces of this in the early period among the *hoi polloi*. 'The messianism of the conceptual leaders of the Sabbatean movement has nothing to do with political redemption but rather with another sphere: metaphysics and faith'.⁹ Moshe Idel, in contrast to Scholem's 'messianic idea', emphasizes that there are 'messianic ideas'. But, he boldly states, 'the main point of the messianic phenomenon moves from the outside to the inside, from history to the soul, from the many to the individual'.¹⁰ And Scholem's grand interpretative scheme, an elegant, parsimonious, counter-intuitive theory of Jewish modernity first adumbrated in 1937 ('Redemption through Sin') his efforts to locate the roots of Jewish Enlightenment and worldly political action in antinomian mysticism and messianism falters on the fate of his single case study and questions posed by evidence from new archival material.¹¹

The sociological analysis of messianism that Liebes implies and Idel directly calls for would likely, for starters, describe a continuum between Jewish messianism as territorial politics versus messianism as unencumbered spirituality; it would not impose *a priori* definitions of one extreme position or another. Moreover, in attempting a more systematic theory for analyzing theological ideas in relation to social behavior, it would be worthwhile to reappropriate Max Weber's notion of order, further developed by Kenneth Burke,¹² Northrop Frye,¹³ David Little¹⁴ and others. These concepts of order bring together questions of meaning and purpose, organization and coordination. Messianism must be seen in terms of order: its reciprocal relationship with the social forms that it takes on as well as its reciprocal relationship

- 8 Y. Liebes, *On Sabbateanism and Its Kabbalah: Collected Essays*, Jerusalem 1995, pp. 10–18 (Hebrew).
- 9 For an excellent summary of the debate, see: M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, New Haven and London 1998, pp. 1–37.
- 10 M. Idel, Introduction to A.Z. Aeshkoly, *Jewish Messianic Movements, I: From the Bar-Kokhba Revolt until the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*², Jerusalem 1987, pp. 11–14 (Hebrew).
- 11 *Ha-Khronika – Te'uda le-Toledot Ya'akov Frank u-Tenu'ato*, Jerusalem 1984 [=The *Kronika – On Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement*], ed. and tr. H. Levine, Jerusalem 1984.
- 12 K. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Boston 1961.
- 13 N. Frye, *Academy of Criticism*, Princeton 1957.
- 14 D. Little, *Religion, Order, and Law: A Study in Prerevolutionary England*, New York 1969.

with the authority, commands, and legitimations which it expresses. As such, messianism is not only the yearning for an improved worldly existence nor the yearning for otherworldly experiences but different combinations of both.

A sociology of knowledge analysis of this raging intergenerational conflict may in and of itself be a messianic act in the biblical terms of 'turning the hearts of fathers unto their sons and the hearts of sons unto their fathers'. But it borders on the banal to point out that Scholem, born to an assimilated family in late 19th century Germany who became an ardent Zionist, might have different perspectives from his disciples who came of scholarly age decades after the establishment of the State of Israel, are Zionists of absolutely no less ardor than Scholem, have fought Israel's wars, and have made personal, existential, and professional choices to live in that country but for whom political emancipation is not a paramount concern.¹⁵

There are current developments, outside of the scholarly domain, that may influence the concerns, the reactions, and the interpretations of scholars of messianism. In our generation, not part of Scholem's experience, we have observed the development of still two more full blown messianic movements within Judaism, to be added to the prior list of Christianity and Sabbatianism: dangerous millennial statements are being made publicly and, more likely, harbored as esoteric teachings among some of the religious nationalists on the West Bank.¹⁶ Moreover, against Scholem's characterization of the messianism in Hasidism, what has developed in recent years within the largest, most powerful, and public Hasidic group, the Lubavitcher, during the illness and after the demise of its leader, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, surely qualifies as a messianic movement, political and emancipatory, in Foucault's terms. That messianism percolated precisely among those Hasidim who showed little enthusiasm for anything other than systemic, rational thinking, systematic political action, community building, and, an outside observer might have assumed, enough worldly activity with which to keep themselves altogether busy until the Messiah does come.

It is in this regard that our enigmatic text, the first Lubavitcher *Rebbe's*

15 D. Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge, Mass. 1979, pp. 52-78.

16 For a delightful fictional treatment of messianism among the West Bank settlers that is becoming frighteningly plausible, see: T. Reich, *The Jewish War*, New York 1995.

response to Napoleon, is all the more intriguing. Why did Shneur Zalman choose the Tsar over Napoleon? Do we have a glimpse at any trace, in the founder of the movement and in the unique manner in which he reacts to a serious cataclysm that is spurring apocalyptic messianic responses, of what is so messily exoteric and overt seven generations later? Notwithstanding the temptations and dangers of the most common of historical fallacies, the 'genetic fallacy', can we discover any roots to the contemporary and most perplexing Lubavitcher messianic movement, so powerfully abrogating centuries of Jewish reticence, in Shneur Zalman's politics and his impressive cost/benefit analysis?¹⁷

Post Modern historians have no monopoly on contextualizing: we must try to interpret Shneur Zalman's response to Napoleon within the range of Hasidic responses to Napoleon; we must relate the Hasidic leader's response to his personal experiences, particularly his experiences with tsardom.

The Napoleonic incursions into the large population centers and Hasidic communities of East European Jewry – in 1807 into the Polish territories that had been annexed by Prussia, in 1809 into Western and a sliver of Eastern Galicia, and in 1812, into the very heartland of Eastern Europe – should provide a very special Rorschach Test, a proto 'clash of civilizations', an early 19th century 'remaking of the world order'.¹⁸ Napoleon, for Jews in remote corners, was their first unmediated experience of the French Revolution. More than two decades after the fall of the *Bastille* and after a variety of messianic French Revolution radicals had turned the message of that revolution inside out and outside in, slogans about liberty, equality, fraternity were trouncing upon the vestiges of feudal autarky and threatening Russian autocracy.

Napoleon himself seems to have had messianic fantasies. There are reports, even documents, not wholly authenticated, that Napoleon was trying hard to arouse messianic responses as well as political support.¹⁹ Rumors were spread about his conquests in Palestine and his recruitment of Jewish soldiers from exotic communities of the East. Na-

17 D.H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, New York 1970, p. 155. The genetic fallacy 'mistakes the becoming of a thing for the thing which it has become'. Historicism, 'the most hateful forms of the genetic fallacy, converts a temporal sequence into an ethical system, history into morality'.

18 B. Mevorakh, *Ha-Yehudim Tahat Shilton Napoleon*, Jerusalem 1970; idem (ed.), *Napoleon u-Tekufato: Reshumot ve-'Eduyot Ivriyot Shel Benei ha-Dor*, Jerusalem 1968, pp. 171-189.

19 F. Kobler, *Napoleon and the Jews*, New York 1976.

napoleon, in his first round, so demonstrably opened the ghetto gates. The same Napoleon in 1806 convened nothing less than a *Sanhedrin*, reminiscent of the Great Assembly of Rabbis, a legislative body not convened since the Talmudic period. Did Napoleon know that according to some rabbinic opinions, the reconvening of the *Sanhedrin* was one of the precursors to the coming of the Jewish messiah? Yet the early modern emancipator used this *Sanhedrin* to pry into the inner life of Jews with forcefulness from which ancient, classical, and medieval enemies of the Jews, politically and spiritually motivated, would have had much to learn from Napoleon. Dangling the promise of full citizenship, he tested Jewish loyalties. In inquisitorial tones, he elicited the position of rabbis in Paris and elsewhere under his control, pressuring them to make politically correct statements by the standards of his Enlightenment, tragic choices for them as rabbinic leaders.

The Napoleon who opened the ghetto gates is the same Napoleon who tried to control Jewish communal life. The messianic fervor was confused and confusing as he made his incursion into Eastern Europe. What of his equivocal reputation was salient and where, what reality factors, what range of concerns might have been encoded in mythic language and how might these illuminate the junction of large scale social processes, motives, and the personal decisions of historical actors; what insights into early modern messianism can we derive from the diverse responses to Napoleon from Jews in different regions – all of these questions require much research, particularly, if we are to assess relationships between the political and spiritual and make any evaluations of what is emancipatory.

Martin Buber's novel, *For the Sake of Heaven*, presents a fictionalized version of responses, across the Hasidic world, to Napoleon and the messianic interpretations engendered by the French liberator, far away from home.²⁰ In other sources we find, for example:

During the first Napoleonic War, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rymanov wanted to make of him Gog and Magog. He supplicated through his prayer that he should win in order that there should be redemption and he said that in his opinion it would be beneficial for Jewish blood to be spilled, from Frystak to Rymanov. They should go up to their knees in Jewish blood in order that there should be an end to our exile. But the masters of

20 M. Buber, *For the Sake of Heaven*, tr. from the German by L. Lewinson, Philadelphia 1945.

Koznitz and Lublin did not agree with this and they prayed that he should fall in the war because they saw through their vision that the end had not yet arrived [...] And the Holy Rabbi Naftali of Ropczyce, then young of years, lived in the town of Dokle. He sided with the rabbis of Koznitz and Lublin and visited the Rabbi of Rymanov to try to dissuade him. He arrived on the eve of Passover, a day of particularly fierce fighting. Rabbi Mendele was standing there, placing Matzahs into the oven. Each time he would say: 'Another five hundred Russians have fallen'. And so it was in the war.²¹

Another tale about Hasidic responses to 'the fall of the King Napoleon', describing reactions to his downfall, provides the dramatic background for Buber's treatment:

After 1813, when the mightiness of God was apparent in the fall of the King Napoleon who was taken into exile, many prophesied that God's name would become exalted. And the Rabbi of Lublin always anticipated God's redemption that the redemption would be made by the King the Messiah soon in our days, Amen. And this is what Levi Isaac of Berditchev said before he died that he would not give any rest to the masters because the Son of Jesse has not arrived.²²

What do these point to in regard to ways in which Napoleon might have been perceived? To be sure, these Hasidic masters were not systematic thinkers. Nevertheless, can we try to identify patterns in their cosmological thinking that correspond with phenomenological categories in the history of religion such as pantheism, theism, theurgic magic and explore their sociological correspondances with social boundaries and internal organization?

Buber tries to present the responses as an intra-Hasidic debate on magic versus non-theurgic religious action, more spiritual in its orientation. The legends that he uses, we note, were transmitted and preserved as oral traditions; they were transcribed during and after the first decade of the 20th century. For Buber, Shneur Zalman's response to Napoleon and the elaborate explanations that Shneur Zalman and

21 Mevorakh, *Napoleon u-Tekufato* (above n. 18), pp, 186–187. See Mevorakh's discussion of the oral sources of these legends and their first appearance in writing, *ibid.*, pp. 183–184.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

others provide for this response were of scant interest even though Shneur Zalman's 1812 letter provides what is most likely the earliest written record.

Most of the responses seem to have been prompted by a very practical consideration: 'Why waste a good war! Let's make something of it in terms of the churning of the messianic gears'. The Hasidic Masters and presumably their growing number of disciples interiorized Napoleon's sojourn across the lands of East European Jewry and gave it meaning within their Jewish framework of life and the Jewish spiritual world. Bracketing Buber's glosses and insofar as the anthologies of Hasidic tales transcribed a century later preserve any reliable reportage, Napoleon was experienced largely as an external event, not someone introducing radical differences into the governance of their lives. Even those Jews who had lived since 1772 under Russian autocracy preserved the political thinking of Jewish experiences under Polish autarky. The political and economic orders were considered to be based on decrees and capriciousness which Jews could negotiate, not on principle.

The hand of a later generation of transcribers of Hasidic tales is recognizable in a pious spin given to these reports: Perhaps because of their inappropriate zeal in hastening the end and for their applied messianism, the major *Rebbs* involved in this experiment died within the same year. But those native ethnographers and pious oral historians were not oblivious to those internal Hasidic politics. The Napoleonic incursion was used to demonstrate the power of the Hasidic master or the competition between the different courts.²³

All this makes Shneur Zalman's response, within the context of his own life, all the more interesting. Another monopoly not possessed by narrative historians involves the joys of unpacking an exemplary tale.²⁴ The *Alte Rebbe*, as he is lovingly called by his disciples, to this day, lived in the northwest sector of the Hasidic world, in that area of the Polish Commonwealth that had been annexed by Catherine the Great and that is now in Belarus and Lithuania. He wrote profound theological tracts that point to a deep spiritual life. At the same time, his communal ordinances would be a proud piece of work for a McKinsey consultant. And anyone who has observed Congressional

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 173–175.

24 The recent work of John Demos, Natalie Zemon Davis, and David Hackett Fischer well illustrate this point.

advocacy, Lubavitcher style, will have no doubts about political propensities that Shneur Zalman of Lyadi was able to pass on.

Let us examine his epistle in its entirety:

On the first day of Rosh Hashana, prior to the Musaf prayer, they showed me: Should Napoleon be victorious, wealth among the Jews will be abundant and the glory of the children of Israel will be exalted. But the hearts of Israel will be separated and distanced from their father in heaven. But if our Master Alexander will triumph, though poverty will be abundant and the glory of Israel will be humbled, the heart of Israel will be bound and joined with its father in heaven. And here is a sign: In the coming days the delight of your eyes will be taken from you and they will begin to recruit soldiers from among the brethren of Israel. And do remember how when we last parted recalling, 'Princes have persecuted me without a cause; But my heart stands in awe of your words.' And for God's sake: Burn this letter²⁵

A line of commentators interpret Shneur Zalman's motives, expressed in cost/benefit analysis terms, so disarmingly stark and pithy, as a call for asceticism.²⁶ 'When you are oppressed then you will discover the Lord your God'. Napoleon the liberator, Napoleon who would establish a rational economy in which Jews would be allowed to participate in productive enterprises, Napoleon the false Messiah would lead the Jews to political and economic security – and to religious indolence. Shneur Zalman, according to this reading of the epistle, picked up a whiff of what Jewish emancipation and modernization is all about. He sensed that if it will be good for the Jews it will be bad for Judaism. Perhaps he envisioned Jewish opulence in an open society with an intermarriage rate of over 50% and, conservative ascetic that he was, had the courage to reject this.

Yet, this interpretation – of what might be called the 'Jews love *tsuris* school' – is out of character with Shneur Zalman of Lyadi and his thinking. Was the author of the most detailed set of communal ordinances and an architect of governance and leadership which has endured to this very day, fearful of mortally-imposed security? Would a leader

25 Mevorach, *Napoleon u-Tekufato* (above n. 18), pp. 182–183.

26 S. Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, Tel-Aviv 1975, pp. 325–344. Alan M. Dershowitz begins his recent book, *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century*, Boston, MA 1997, with this tale of Shneur Zalman of Lyadi calling this the Jewish delight in *tsuris*.

who was concerned with the economic pursuits of his followers, whose administrative ordinances included detailed considerations of matters of livelihood and finance, would this type of leader welcome persecution and summarily dismiss opportunities for stability?

His son and successor made proposals to the government for vocational schools and agricultural colonies saying, 'No Jew need be ashamed of engaging in farm work, for our ancestors in Palestine were farmers. If we will purchase or rent the land for long periods, we shall obtain a livelihood...'²⁷ That son, better than the *Maskilim*, the Jewish modernist savants who accepted French physiocratic notions of what in later years would be called *pruduktivizatsya*, productive contributions to the wealth of the state – that son of Shneur Zalman, and likely Shneur Zalman himself, understood that Enlightenment inspired 'reform' in Eastern Europe was little more than a fraud and that agriculture was a code word for 'serfdom'.

There is little else in Shneur Zalman's Hasidism that suggests that he accorded such religious significance to *tsuris*. He was not particularly on the ascetic side of Hasidism. Furthermore, his rejection of Napoleon was so vehement as to suggest some other motives.

The opening of the archives in the former Soviet Union, for now, at least, holds limited promise for a solution to these problems. A new cottage industry among underpaid academics and librarians has generated custom made forgeries. Moreover, the demonstrated alacrity and competence of contemporary Lubavitcher Hasidim in moving documents from Moscow and St. Petersburg to Crown Heights makes access even a greater problem than in the days of the former Soviet Union. An examination of the original epistle seems to be impossible for the moment.

We do have a cache of documents that round out the reports of Shneur Zalman of Lyadi's imprisonment in St. Petersburg, fourteen and twelve years before Napoleon's arrival on Hasidic turf. Indeed, Shneur Zalman was incarcerated by Tsar Paul and Tsar Alexander I which should make him no great fan of tsardom. Could his enthusiasm be little more than an early and undiagnosed symptom of the Stockholm Syndrome?

27 M. Teitelbaum, *Ha-Rav Mi-Lyadi u-Miflegat Habad*, Warsaw 1910, pp. 238–246. On Shneur Zalman teachings and on his son, see: R. Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, New York 1992; idem, *Torat ha-Elohuth ba-Dor ha-Sheni shel Hasidut Habad*, Jerusalem 1982; N. Loewenthal (ed.), *Communicating the Infinite*, Chicago 1990.

He was also released by those tsars, it might be pointed out. This should provide some explanation for his gratitude. Indeed, we now better understand those circumstances under which he was released. And it may be those circumstances that shed new light on Shneur Zalman's loyalty to the Tsar. The new documents provide some insight into what the Russian prosecutors were fishing for, how Shneur Zalman handled them, and ultimately, why, unlike so many Old Believers and religious leaders of various sorts that were subject to these types of investigations and ultimately sent to Siberia, why Shneur Zalman was freed – not once but twice.

Let us allow for the possibility of a rather pedestrian explanation. As to the unexpectedly happy ending to Shneur Zalman's political problems, let us once more evoke the image of politically active Lubavitcher Hasidim; lobbying in the Tsar's court; this surely involved one primary means – bribes. It could be that what Shneur Zalman liked about the Tsar and his administration is their inefficiency and corruptibility. From the first annexations of Polish territory by Catherine the Great and the first encounters with Jews, all sorts of reforms were promulgated, some fair and favorable to the interests of many Jews now residing in Russian territory, most absolutely not. The common denominator: virtually none was implemented.

New documents indicate that Shneur Zalman's first arrest, at least, was not primarily the consequence of the Jewishly prompted anti-Hasidic agitation and internecine warfare, as we thought; neither was it planned by the tsarist officials to provide the opportunity for extortion.²⁸ We now have the text of the first accusation against Shneur Zalman, made on May 8th, 1798 by a certain 'Hirsch the son of David' of Vilna. He accuses the rabbi and his associates of fomenting rebellion among the youth, a fairly standard accusation; the Hasidim live unbridled lives with no framework of law, again, not an unusual mode of defaming. An accusation that he makes that is not standard is that Shneur Zalman is sending money to assist the French Revolution. 'Rabbi Zalman the son of Bar ukh [...] tries to assist the French Revolution' is written on the cover page of the investigation. Shneur Zalman was accused of sending money to the Sultan as well as to Napoleon in

28 These documents from the Prosecutor General's archives in Petersburg are reviewed in *Kerem Habad*, Kefar Habad 1992, pp. 17–21, 29–31. *Kerem Habad*, a journal of the movement, is not always up to scholarly standards. But a reproduction of the original accusation is presented.

Palestine. The irony should not be lost; Shneur Zalman's efforts to establish a well run Hasidic court, to protect his followers from Russian autocracy and its administrators involved political maneuvering about which those officials said little. The accusation against him for political activity is based on Shneur Zalman's most messianic act – organizing financial support for pious Jews residing in the Holy Land who were praying for the redemption. This was seen as a political act of supporting the French Revolution.

There is good reason to believe that the accuser, Hirsch the son of David of Vilna, did not exist and that a clumsy effort was being made to attribute this particular attack to Jews. The accuser recommends to the Tsar that the Hasidim be sent into exile 'and there they will have their promised land for which they have been hoping and also the messianic wild ox and leviathan'. Though Jewish attacks on Hasidim in no way lacked virulence, this frighteningly cynical taunt does not sound like it comes from a Jewish voice. The Prosecutor General Lopukhin reports these accusations in a letter to the Tsar. Paul who was having enough problems consolidating power during his short-lived reign seems to have had the time and concern to review this case himself. On August 14th, 1798 he writes, '...should it turn out that they indeed did participate in any type of rebellion, of these do send them to me immediately'.

We are still left with the question as to who organized this initiative. Whatever the case may be, it is evident that Russian autocratic leaders could hardly be characterized as interested only in the surfaces of Jewish life. Napoleon, however, was certainly more the interventionist and generally a lot more efficient. In view of the serious charges leveled against him by the tsarist administration and – what he likely did not know – Paul himself, Shneur Zalman had reason to be grateful, perhaps, even loyal.

If archival material up to this point has been suggestive but not conclusive as to Shneur Zalman's truest motives for his enthusiastic support of the Russian autocrats, perhaps we should take a more careful look at the epistle itself. In comparing some of the printed versions of this letter, it is clear that there have been deletions. Some of the historians who wanted to like Shneur Zalman as one of the more reasonable of Hasidic masters, did not pay attention, even took liberties with some phrases that they did not understand or that did not lend support to their image of this *Rebbe*. The recipient, we should note, is Moses Meizeles, who was also a friend of Shneur Zalman's most important

and vitriolic enemy, the Gaon of Vilna. Meizeles was himself, like his Vilna friend, a man who combined traditional study, even mysticism, with scientific erudition. Meizeles seemed to be under some suspicion of organizing a spy ring on behalf of Napoleon. He escaped to Palestine and years later made a most positive impression on the secretary of the visiting magnate and philanthropist, Moses Montefiore. From our perspective, his singularly great contribution to Jewish history is that he did not follow Shneur Zalman's instructions to burn the letter. Shneur Zalman makes two predictions that will serve as a validation for his position. 'The delight of your eyes will be taken from you',²⁹ he tells Meizeles, sharing an intuition about his own numbered days, and also that some other precious ones will be taken away, perhaps with less permanence. Shneur Zalman alludes to the conscription of young Jewish men, even children, which had been instituted in another part of the lands of former Poland. This reminds us that Napoleonic influences were closer to the heartland of East European Jewry a few years before the War of 1812. The Duchy of Warsaw, which Napoleon had much to do with the assemblage of its parcels, was also governed by the Napoleonic Code. There, as well as in the lands of Joseph II, going back to the early 1780s – conscription was imposed upon the Jewish community. Shneur Zalman was reminding his friend that Napoleon's political and emancipatory program may not only weaken Jews' ties to their celestial father but also to their terrestrial children.

But there seems to have been a heading to the letter – in fact, an encoded secret heading – ignored by most historians. 'It is the way of the world to leave behind the hides and empty jugs'. In and of itself, this statement is seemingly meaningless. But it refers to a discussion in the Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma*, 12a. How should the pilgrims to Jerusalem during the three major festivals handle their fiscal affairs, the Talmud asks. Insofar as the holy city belongs to the entire Jewish people, it would violate that principle for pilgrims to pay their hotel bills. On the other hand, as much as the rabbis, like medieval scholastics, were concerned to 'save the appearance' not allowing reality to interfere with theory and principle, their economic savvy encouraged them to predict a desolate future for Jerusalem's tourist industry if pilgrims did not pay for their accommodations and hotel keepers had no economic incentives to provide public services. The solution to the dilemma? 'It is the way of the world to leave behind the hides and empty wine jugs'.

29 Mevorakh, *Napoleon u-Tekufato* (above n. 18), pp. 182–183.

How does this respond to Jerusalem's problems or to Shneur Zalman's problems and what was his association to that Talmudic formulation at the moment that he was making his inspired cost/benefit analysis of Jewish choices in the modern world? The hides were the one part of the animals for which pilgrims, bringing their sacrifice to the Temple, had no use. They could not be a part of any special sacrifice or priestly gift. On the other hand, they were not without intrinsic value. Similarly, the wine jugs that had been used to transport the fruits of local vineyards, dedicated to spiritual elevation during the festivals, were now merely empty vessels that would be a burden to transport back home. They, too, were far from worthless. 'It is the way of the world...'. That is how you pay the hotel bill while preserving the principle that Jerusalem belongs to all of the people. But what does this have to do with Napoleon?

Here we have a real opening into Shneur Zalman's political thinking and spiritual proclivities. In the lands of the Tsar, he thought, 'It is the way of the world to leave behind the hides and the empty jugs'. One can pay tutelage with objects that have value, to be sure, that are external, functional, and ultimately empty in relation to the core of Jewish living. The Tsar demanded, even deserved, loyalty. But Napoleon would be satisfied with nothing less than patriotism, the fullest, the most enthusiastic, and most exclusive commitment.

Shneur Zalman of Lyadi was no less inclined than his colleagues to find deeper eschatological meaning in the War of 1812. But seeing the events outside of his window as the representation of predestined apocalyptic battles did not exonerate him, he believed, from worldly choices and activities. He could envision cosmic circles while at one and the same time organizing spy rings. Indeed, while praying for Tsar Alexander, he organized espionage against Napoleon; he ingratiated himself and his followers, by services rendered, to the Russian generals.

In this cryptic letter we hear what he is telling the sixty wagons of his disciples who are escaping with him, eastward, through the fall and winter of 1812, hardly staying ahead of Napoleon's troops. His son reports about his father's last days in a letter sent to the same Moses Meizeles. The peril and the impurity that Shneur Zalman associates with Napoleon seem to meld as he urges his followers to move, quicker and quicker, in their escape. Napoleon is the quintessence of evil, violence, and – what he seems to condemn the most – hubris and arrogant secularity. The 'Kings of the North' are the source of compassion. In an extraordinarily ecumenical observation, Shneur Zalman, as reported

by his son, notes with appreciation the manner in which the Tsar includes in his soldiers' preparedness for battle the blessings and sprinkling of holy water administered by Russian Orthodox priests. Each Napoleonic victory is accorded hidden blessing in the transvaluated world of messianism. He succumbed to the difficulties of the journey and the anguish of choosing between 'paths of emancipation', before witnessing the fulfillment of one of his predictions – '*nafol tipol Napoleon*', verily will Napoleon fall.

With all of his messianism, Shneur Zalman was not opposed to long-range strategic planning. With his characteristic deliberation, he examined the redefinition of the relationship of Jews to the state, change that was taking place across Europe and in America. He realized that the future welfare of Jews as individuals, the viability of their collective lives, and the plausibility of their faith could not depend on charters here or concessions there as had been the case in feudal societies and in societies organized by estates and with corporate structures. He confronted a tragic choice envisioning greater opportunities for civic society and associational life in the interstices of tsarist autocracy than in Napoleonic totalitarian mass society. He was prescient about Napoleon and his heirs; less so in regard to the Tsar and tsardom in its metamorphoses.

The Hasidic movement that Shneur Zalman of Lyadi founded and inspired endured under the unique duress of the autocratic repressiveness of the Tsar and the totalitarian democracy of Napoleon, as their commissar disciples institutionalized both legacies in the Soviet Union. The stories of the survival of Lubavitcher Hasidism under the most repressive conditions of Communism and the reconstruction of East European Jewish life in the corners of liberal democracies on our planet, such as Brooklyn and Bnai Brak, following Nazi mass murder of Jews and massive delegitimation of Jewish faith are stories yet to be told. That social space, the intermediary structures of civic society, were offered neither by Napoleon nor by the Tsar. How did the delayed reaction to the Holocaust as it was expressed in that cognitively and socially well protected civic society of liberal democracies catalyze shifts in the delicate balances of the spiritual and political dimensions of Shneur Zalman's messianism and worldly preoccupations that contribute to a messianism that was by no means 'sublimated', that addressed the political as well as the spiritual domain, and that was as thisworldly in its orientation as the messianism of early Christians and Sabbateans? Whatever may be learned from Shneur Zalman of Lyadi's deliberations

that might reflect on the means or *how* questions – the political and spiritual dimensions of Sabbateanism and other earlier forms of messianism – the *where* questions, of the social location of messianism and how to retain their plausibility, which confronted Shneur Zalman were quite different than those facing Sabbateanism and other earlier messianic movements.

So much for reductionism, post-modernist or otherwise. There was a lot that moved that was demographic and economic, spiritual, certainly, but even political in a fashion that Foucault would not quite recognize. Whether or not modernity for Jews and for others ultimately will be emancipatory, for those of us who possess neither Shneur Zalman of Lyadi's messianic optimism nor planning skills, we might ever so cautiously state – not all of the data is in.