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We don't need another ... Messiah

By Uzi Silber

Tags: [Molkho](#), [Judaism](#), [Reubeni](#) >>

On February 2nd 1524, a mysterious dwarf named David Reubeni arrived in Venice. Introducing himself to his hosts, Reubeni claimed to be the brother of a certain Joseph, King of the long-lost tribe of Reuben, residing along the fabled River Sambatyon in Arabia. He was on a mission, he confided, to gain the assistance of European kings in wresting the Land of Israel from the Muslim Ottomans.

Venice's Jews enthusiastically provided Reubeni with the means to continue his journey, in the course of which he managed to meet Pope Clement VII, the Kings of Spain and Portugal and the Holy Roman Emperor.

Reubeni's exploits eventually took on a messianic air, whipping up considerable excitement in the Jewish world. Duly inspired, one young meranno noble would revert to his ancestral religion, circumcise himself, assume the name Shlomo Molkho, and declare himself a messiah in his own right.

Molkho and Reubeni would forge a complicated trans-Mediterranean relationship, charming European potentates who eventually turned on them. In the end, Molkho was burned at the stake by the Inquisition while Reubeni died in prison. Many of their Jewish admirers suffered similar fates.

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These two colorful characters are part of an ignominious procession of two-dozen or so would-be Jewish messiahs stretching back over 20 centuries.



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The notion of a messiah, which means 'anointed', originally referred strictly to priests and kings. Following the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE the definition of a Messiah was expanded in Isaiah to mean 'savior', and was further developed after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE in Second Isaiah and Jeremiah into a sort of superhero who would lead us into a utopian era centered on a rebuilt Temple. Sitting by the rivers of Babylon, Ezekiel writes of a frightening pre-messianic 'End of Days' and a resurrection of the dead.

Early recipients of the messianic title included Cyrus, King of Persia (apparently you didn't have to be Jewish to be a messiah at the time), Zerubabel, the Jewish governor of Judea, and the Macabbees.

By the arrival of the First century of the Common Era, belief in the messiah had become a major pillar of Jewish faith -- despite the fact that no mention of a messiah-as-savior exists anywhere in the Torah.

Over the ensuing 2,000 years, the rise in messianic expectation strongly correlated with the level of stress Jews happened to be enduring. Roman oppression, crusades, inquisitions, religious wars, Cossacks, pogroms, and even a Holocaust, were inevitably followed by the emergence of some charismatic mystically-oriented figure cloaked with the mantle of the messiah, offering elusive solace to a broken Jewish community. Many left behind a trail of calamity that sometimes lasted centuries.

The list is depressingly long; making appearances in the first century alone are the long-forgotten Simon, Athronges, Judas of Galilee, Theudas, and Menahem Ben Judah. Yet one of their contemporaries, Jesus, would leave behind a following that would torment his own people for many centuries to come.

In the second century, some decades after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, Rabbi Akiva would declare Bar Kokhba messiah. One particularly fateful outcome of his disastrous revolt against Rome would be the renaming of Judea as Palestine, a nightmare that haunts us to this very day.

With the crusades sweeping Kurdistan a millennium later, David Alroy would declare himself messiah, urge Jews to rebel against the Muslim Sultan, with the promise of a triumphant return to Jerusalem where he would reign as king. Thousands of Jews who joined Alroy would perish with him at the hands of the Muslims.

The bloody Inquisitions three centuries later spurred the emergence of kabalistically-influenced visionaries and messiahs. In one case, a 15-year old Merrano girl claiming messianic visions induced fellow Merranos to reveal themselves, only to be burned along with her at the stake.

The path was cleared for Shabbtai Tzvi, who pronounced himself messiah in 1648. In a fit of international hysteria, many thousands of confused Jews as well as gentiles braced themselves for the End of Days, enduring incessant fasting, self-lashing, rolling in snow, and plunging into the frigid winter seas.

Multitudes sold their businesses, in anticipation of their return to Zion. Those who doubted were attacked by mobs. Many Jews ceased keeping Jewish law, fully expecting these statutes to shortly be transcended.

But when Shabbtai Tzvi was later jailed in Turkey and converted to Islam under duress, the massive messianic madness turned to mass shame. Some assumed his apostasy to be a kind of messianic trick. Yet many thousands continued to believe in him for three centuries after his lonely death, converting, like their messiah, to Islam.

Shabbtai Tzvi was followed a century later by Jacob Frank, a Galitzianer who could be referred to as a 'messianic aggregator'. Frank taught that all previous messiahs had been true: that Jesus, Mohammed, and even Shabbtai Tzvi possessed a messianic soul that had now transmigrated into Frank. Ultimately Frank lapsed into Catholicism, taking with him thousands of his Jewish followers.

And now we have the unfortunate spectacle of the Meshichist and Elohist disciples of Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Given our terrible national experience with Messianism, it's puzzling that not even one sage through the ages would have ever considered the possibility of suspending the idea, especially in view of the similarity of Jewish messianic expectations and those of Christians.

But could the messiah have arrived right under our noses? A true messiah should be judged on accomplishment. If it was, our short list of candidates would consist of Herzl and Ben Gurion, two thoroughly unreligious Jews. They midwived the Third Jewish Commonwealth into being, a startling achievement never to be approached by any would-be messiah, ever.

Some could argue with a degree of justification that messianic yearning has sustained the Jewish People during the long years of the Diaspora. Still, the tragedies messianism has inflicted upon our ancestors are too much to bear, and in any case the Diaspora can now be ended with an 11-hour flight.

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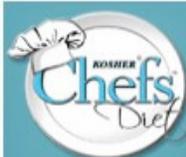
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