

A NOOLOGICAL APPROACH TO JEWISH MESSIANISM

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The study herein aims at analysing the Messianic idea in the history of the Jewish people from the point of view of noological theory, which is the science of sociology bringing to the forefront the importance of spiritual factors in the comprehension and research of societies. After a short review of the moments recorded in history as Messianic events, we analyse the Sabbatian movement which has been considered the most important manifestation of such nature in the Jews' history until the present time. In order to facilitate the understanding of Messianic events we also mention data about the social framework which contributed to the birth of such events, along with the cultural context of the communities where Messianic ideas were generated.

Key words: *Judaism, Jewish Messianism, millenarianism, noology.*

The history of the Jewish people is unavoidably influenced by religion, a dimension which becomes an essential component in the Jewish identity. Faith in God, observance of the Torah¹, redemption – these are elements which may not be ignored for anyone who wishes to truly know the Jewish people. A scientific approach to the understanding of this people may not elude the importance of the spiritual dimension of the way history is lived.

In the noological sociology the spiritual becomes the most suitable framework one needs in order to understand the forces communities, peoples can employ with the purpose of maintaining their identity. The Jewish people are representative in this sense, since their spiritual journey in history begins when they were chosen by God. From that moment on the Jewish people was to always evolve around two major poles: the blessing, as a result of being the chosen people, characterised by the observance of religious norms, and the divine punishment as a result of breaching the Law (the Torah). On the other hand, the history of the Jewish people may be regarded as a story where the word of God is both observed and then breached, as a constant waiting for the redemption of a people currently in

¹ Torah represents the Pentateuch, the five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

exile, a moment which should take place when the time is right, bringing about the coming of Messiah.

JEWISH MESSIANISM SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF NOOLOGICAL SOCIOLOGY

The noological approach gives value to the religious dimension in peoples' lives, to the various manifestation faith takes and to the power to overcome critical moments which a given people encounter in its history. Thus, sociology becomes "the science of noological and spiritual frameworks which are updated along with the intensity of individual and collective spiritual emotions, but they can also become obsolete when such intensities subside or such emotions take a different route" (Bădescu, 2002, p. xxv).

The religious experience of the Jewish people, both "positive" (as hope and waiting for Messiah) and "negative" (when one attempts to understand the persecutions, expulsions or mass killings), can be best revealed with the help of the evolution of the Messianic idea. The Messianic concept has had various interpretations over the years, all depending on a given political, economic or social context in which the Jews were living. However, before presenting the evolution of the Messianic idea and the way in which the Jewish people have turned this element of redemption into a current issue, it is necessary to make a brief introduction into the theory of noological sociology.

The system of noological study which helps reach the spiritual order of the world, is based on the theory of spiritual latencies, of the latter's opportunities to become current and on spiritual learning. The spiritual latencies are energies, virtual elements which can manifest, under the form of spiritual frameworks which make up a people's soul. These are "transcendental capacities", which exist "deep within ourselves, in terms of place and function, as tendencies, but they also dwell outside ourselves, as spiritual contexts of collective existence" (ibid., p. 17). Professor Bădescu gives the following features of spiritual latencies (cf. ibid., p. 188):

- They are "categories of spiritual functions", making up one's spiritual sub-layers which, along with education and culture, help "the individual and collective spirit" come to life;
- They are to be found in the vast majority of people and are felt as "primary, original sensual realities";
- Their nature is that of a community, "they appear only when two or more individuals interact";
- "They play a unifying role in an individual, but also *among* more individuals, therefore they bind together a community, not just unify it";
- They take the form of traditions, stereotypes, mental formulas, symbols, "exterior elements of a symbolical, religious, mythical and artistic nature".

To understand the above-mentioned spiritual frameworks, with the help of which spiritual latencies come to life, one must feel, thus reaching a spiritual approach to societies and peoples, which is totally different than the positivist method of research. Such feeling gives access to spiritual forces which have been activated, namely to the “spiritual places” where the members of a community, although physically apart, can meet in a spiritual communion, thus forming a strong identity in spite of any boundaries or obstacles they might otherwise encounter. From this perspective, the Jewish history offers a suitable framework of understanding the importance of such “spiritual places”; this is mostly obvious by looking into the events following the exodus. Having to face the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, in 70 CE, the Jewish people spread all around the world only to “meet” again in the study of the Torah and in the hope for Messiah, return to the “Promised Land”, reconstruction of the Temple, and the waiting for Messiah. In such a case, “*the law of the spiritual place and that of spiritual communities turn out to be stronger than any forces known to man, any conquest or despotism*” (ibid., p. 246). In such spiritual places time takes on new a new meaning, the past with its triumphs and failures – is constantly “relived”, brought to the present days. The critical events of the past are experiences over and over again in a state of mourning, of constant commemoration of the dramas which the Jewish people went through, while the liberating moments are celebrated over and over again; the latencies are constantly brought to the present, their role contributing to the strengthening of collective memory and group unity. In this sense Professor Bădescu states that the re-experiencing of the past in the present, with the help of “*deep feelings ..., is brought to the surface under the form of mythical and legendary events*”, while the future is presented “*as a Messianic discharge of incredible force*” (ibid., p. 165).

The noological frameworks are represented by these places of spiritual encounters, namely in celebrations, legends, myths, ceremonies, and symbols, and they are continuously turned into present events by being taken on and experienced as such. Knowing the way in which an entire community relates to spiritual frameworks, to their intensity, helps outline the following: a community’s noological profile, historical power of creation, capacity to defend and maintain identities, but also the failures, both cultural and spiritual. “Therefore, the power of a people represents their spiritual force, nothing more and nothing less” (ibid., p. 393). Professor Bădescu emphasises; and the history of the Jewish people speaks fully of such phenomena. Having to cope with the state of exile, with the issues and problems brought about by the necessity to share their life with other people, what kept the strength of the Jews’ spiritual power was their faith and belief in being the chosen people, the study of the Torah and the waiting for Messiah’s coming.

The spiritual laws of the Jews are contained in the Law received by Moses from God and in the rabbinic traditions described in the Talmud. Religious learning and concepts have formed the spiritual face of this people, thus drawing behavioural patterns which have suffered various changes over the years,

depending on the social, cultural or political environment, but these have not altered the identity of the Jewish people, namely their existence as the “chosen people”. The influences exercised on the Jews can be best shown in the waiting for Messiah, since the history of the Jewish people may very well be understood as a constant waiting for Messiah’s coming.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: MILLENARIANISM – MESSIANISM

“The spiritual places”, mentioned by Professor Bădescu, where the Jews “met” during their journey through the hardships and realities of exile, have been influenced by the people’s belief in the coming of Messiah, with various degrees of actual manifestation and durability in time. Starting with movements which were quickly brought to an end by the authorities of the countries where they were born to those which lasted a long time, even after the murder or disappearance of their leader, who was considered to be Messiah. The most enduring movement was that of Sabbatai Zvi, which we will discuss again at the end of the study herein. The coming to life of these latencies, of the redemption of the Jewish people, brought about by various millenarian and/or messianic movements, have taken on various forms depending on the social and cultural contexts in which they had been set up.

MILLENARIANISM

The millenarian concept, as “spiritual place” where the Jews have found each other in different time and historic moments, can be defined as the belief in “destruction of the natural and social orders as a prelude to a perfect society and state of being” (Sharot, 1982, p. 11). According to Sharot, millenarianism may be explained in more than one way: it is a remedy to a social situation negatively influenced by suffering and persecution; it may be a result of a situation of social disruption, a disintegration of a certain social and political order, or it could be a form of protest against suppressors, by overthrowing a given social order (a Marxist view). A millenarian movement is not necessarily a Messianic one. The character of a redeemer may very well be absent in a millenarian movement, such position being in fact filled in by abstract divine forces. The same could be said about Messiah, as he “may offer redemption from existing bodily ills rather than promise redemption in a future state of bliss” (ibid., p. 12).

Crucial events in the life of the Jewish people can be listed here, such as: the reception of the Promised Land from God, the exodus, the kingdoms and the construction of the Temple, the exiles, the persecutions they were forced to experience because they were foreigners in other nations, the Holocaust, the birth of the Israeli state etc. However, leaving aside the historical and political features

of events, these examples require a look into the spiritual factor which simply may not be ignored when understanding and explaining the existence of the Jewish people. The manner in which a people relate to history, understand events (both “positive” and “negative”) and the latter’s importance, brings to life spiritual values and latencies which have given a people the strength to sustain catastrophes, to maintain and even consolidate a community’s identity in times of troubled waters.

During its journey through history, where major events have been exile, persecutions and expulsions, the Jewish people have always kept a religious awareness of being the “chosen people”, thus feeling and acting differently than any other people. Whether they interpreted the catastrophic events in their lives as punishment for the failure to observe religion or for their ancestors’ sins, or as signs of Messiah’s coming, the Jews have never lost hope in their people’s redemption, in the rebuilding of the Temple and the return from exile into the “Promised Land”.

MESSIANISM

Michael Kogan asserts that in the Old Testament the name of Messiah is mentioned 39 times, but „not one of these usages refers to a king of the distant future” (Kogan, 2008, p. 39), but to a “person chosen by God” to lead the people. The King Saul and King David are the “chosen ones”, which meant they „were considered the legitimate kings of Israel by the will of God” (Schweid, 1985, p. 2). According to Schweid, this should indicate that monarchy is a framework where ethics and spiritual aspects bear a vast importance, but also the recognition of the fact that authority is not a position assigned by man, rather by God. Thus, the role of the king was to lead the people in compliance with certain religious rules, again in full compliance with God’s law, as stated in the Torah. In the Old Testament, “a “redeemer” is a person of social and legal standing who on this account has the ability, and thus also the obligation, to extend his protection to his kin and dependents within his family, tribe or people” (ibid., p. 5).

Since certain books of prophets do not even mention the role of a Messiah, but only speak of God as the redeemer, during the Middle Ages “normative Jewish millenarianism had come to give a large role to the redeemer, the messiah” (Sharot, 1982, p. 51). Bar Kokhba’s riot against the Romans in 135 CE is followed by the dispersion of the Jews, while the hope that their people might ever regain independence by means of warfare disappeared. In such a case, one could only hope for a redeemer, a person who would save the people, would take the Jews to the Promised Land, would reinstate sovereignty, and would rebuild the Temple. After these events we find in the Middle Ages the set up of many millenarian movements, the appearance of a considerable number of persons who believed themselves to be Messiah with a mission to unify and save the people. In this

context “a rich literature of messianic visions thus came into being, authored by men possessed of esoteric wisdom or prophetic inspiration” (Schweied, 1985, p. 7). Such literature will continue to be produced for a number of centuries, under the influence of the various political and social contexts in which it would be generated.

In the sociologic study on Messianism, mystics and magic, Sharot states that millenarian movements are often considered liberating events from an economic and political point of view. However, what must be explained is why certain such movements bear eschatological features, and in the struggle thus begun one invokes or calls for divine forces. If at the beginning the Jewish millenarianism did not have an eschatological nature, rather it simply aimed at regaining independence and sovereignty, after a series of disappointments anticlimaxes and defeats, “the Jews became more desperate in their hopes and began to believe that their situation would be transformed only after a period of cosmic catastrophe” (Sharot, 1982, p. 60). This state of fact existed in the Diaspora, where such movements had virtually no chance of ever being successful. Millenarianisms and the appearance of more than one Messiah have been present in the Diaspora as well, these being strongly influenced by the social contexts at a given time. Regardless of whether these have to do with political instability, persecutions or news of crusades and conflicts between the Christians and the Muslims, such events have contributed greatly to the set off of the above-mentioned hope for a Messiah, however different the triggers of such events may be. This is why “Even in the absence of oppression or disruption millennial movements may sometimes be sparked off by an adventitious event or series of events that interpreted through already-existing, but dormant, millenarian beliefs as a sign of imminent transformation” (ibid., p. 61).

MESSIANISM – THE COMING TO LIFE OF A LATENCY

Before analysing the millenarian and messianic in the Jewish history, in the social, political and economic context in which they first arose, Sharot defines the normative messianism as a “belief in the coming of the messiah and the collective salvation of the Jews in a future, this-worldly, perfect age may, therefore, be described as normative in traditional Judaism” (Sharot, 1982, p. 46). The biblical prophets and the majority of the pre-exile ones would express their clear social and political hopes, by emphasising „the political power that Israel would have after the Redemption” (ibid., p. 46).

Michael Kogan believes that out of all the concepts about the existence of a messianic king, the one referring to the family of David is the most representative, however not the only one. Another “chosen one” is mentioned in the Old Testament, namely “this is the priestly Messiah of Aaron’s line whose office was also confirmed with an anointing sacred oil” (Kogan, 2008, p. 49); prophet Isaac mentions another messianic character – “the suffering servant of God”, who suffers

for the sins of others, and “the son of man”, a character with a divine component, who is supposedly expected to appear from the heavens to save his people.

According to Sharot, after the last revolt against the Romans, the apocalyptic literature tends to distinguish between a Messiah as warrior related to the family of Joseph and a Messiah related to David, who is to reign in the future kingdom.

The followers of millenarianism was either that of support towards the human actions which contribute to the coming of Messiah or that of counter-act, of blame to those who wish to speed up such coming by making use of forced military actions. Bar Kokhba’s revolt in 135 CE falls into the category of militarist millenarianism, leading to the proclamation of Bar-Kokhba by Rabbi Akiba as the Messiah. However, the failure of the revolt generated distress, along with the “discrediting of militarist millenarianism” (Sharot, 1982, p. 50). On the other hand, the essenian writers in Qumran belong to a second category, where the general belief is that “the decisive war was to be fought on the transcendental plane, but they also believed that a ascetic life and exact observance of the commandments would hasten the Day of the Lord” (id.).

After the defeat of the revolt in 135 by the Romans, the exile followed, and Israel’s land thus takes on paramount importance. “Normative Jewish millenarism foresaw a perfect space as well as a perfect time. The millenium had a center, the Land of Israel and, more specifically, Jerusalem, where the most perfect state of being would be achieved. The ingathering of exiles into this perfect space was spoken about in the books of the biblical prophets, but its importance in millenarian thought grew with the destruction of national independence and the ever-greater dispersion of the Jews” (ibid., p. 49).

In the post-exile period one witnesses the birth of a dualist vision of transformation both of the concrete frames and the transcendental ones. This view originates in the prophesies of Deutero-Isaiah, Sharot believes, while the apocalyptic literature places the current world and the one to come facing each other. Along with the exile to Babylon, “political redemption remained subordinate to mythical and cosmic fantasies”, and the messianic period was seen as “a transitional period of catastrophic events prior to the reign of the Messiah (ibid., pp. 47-48).

The apocalyptic literatures show “the calamities and disasters of the current period as “labour pain” or “messianic pain”, since they precede the coming of Messiah” (Eliade, 1999, p. 390). On the other hand, if in certain views the reign of Messiah would last one thousand years, only to be followed by the end of the world, Messiah’s death and the birth of a new creation, in others Messiah dwells “among eternal beings, next to Enoch, Elijah and other characters who rose above to the heavens” (id.).

During the Middle Ages, in several areas inhabited by Jews, a series of events take place which make the Jews believe Messiah has come to save their entire people. Some movements choose a Messiah as their leader, while others do not. Thus, during the crusades, Sharot speaks of the existence of seven millenarian

movements co-existing in a relatively short period of time, namely between 1060 and 1172 (ibid., pp. 55-56).

- Maimonide² is the only one to speak of an alleged Messiah, between 1060 and 1070, in “Linon” (without clarifying whether this refers to a town in Spain or France). This particular character has attracted a considerable number of supporters, along with the belief that he could fly. He was then killed by the Christian authorities together with some of his followers.
- In 1096, a movement set up in Salonika, which appeared to have attracted the Jews from a large area of Byzantium. This time the existence of a Messiah is not mentioned at all, but there is reference to the Jews’ preparation for imminent redemption by abandoning their businesses and resigning from the positions they would hold.
- Maimonide also talks of a case in Cordoba (1100-1110) where with the help of astrology they had calculated the precise date of Messiah’s coming. Ibn Aryeh was then selected as Messiah, but the leaders of the Jewish community in the town punished him by public flogging.
- According to a document discovered in Cairo, the prophet Elijah appeared in a girl’s dream telling her that Messiah’s coming is at hand, a piece of news received with much enthusiasm by the Jews. As a result, they stopped paying their taxes and removed the bands they would wear for identification purposes, which in turn lead to the reception of fines from the authorities.
- In Marocco, (1120-1125), a pious scholar, announces that Messiah was to come around Easter that year. Many Jews had to face bankruptcy after they had listened to such man’s pieces of advice, namely to sell everything they owned.
- In the North Caucasus (1120-1147), the most important and ample messianic movement of its time takes place; this movement borrows military character, as well, namely it acts as a revolt against Islamic ruling. The leader of the group, David Alroy, - considered by many as being Messiah- managed to gather people in order to travel to Jerusalem. Following Muslim pressure exercised in Jewish religious leaders, aimed at calming the spirits in Alroy’s movement, the leader is threatened to be excommunicated, but he refuses to give up the fight. Later on he is murdered. Even after his death, his followers in Azerbaijan continued to believe he was the one chosen to be Messiah.
- The last millenarian uprising took place in Yemen, between 1171 and 1172, when an alleged Messiah obtains the support of the Jewish

² Moise ben Maimon (Rabi, doctor, philosopher) is considered the most important scholar of Judaism in the Middle Ages. He tried to combine the ideas of the Torah with Aristotelic philosophy. His most important works are Commnetary on the Mishna and Guide for the Perplexed.

population in the town, but he is arrested by the Muslim authorities. Since he is convinced he would survive a possible beheading, he specifically requests that he undergo this particular type of punishment. Even after his death his followers continued to believe he was their Messiah.

Millenarianisms and messianic character appear in the Middle Ages in Spain and, after the latter's expulsion in 1492, they move to Italy. Moshe Idel finds that Messianism in Italy may not be explained only by looking into the effects of the Spanish expulsion. Thus, the messianism in the beginning of the 16th century represents a result of the existence of a similar movement in Spain, which in turn had met the Ashkenaz one, without leaving out the Christian messianic movement found in Italy during the Renaissance. These are the reasons why when attempting to understand a Messianic movement— or any movement, for that matter— one must analyse the social, historic, and political context in which such a movement is born, but also outline the spiritual “face” based on which a certain movement would be set up and run. The effort to understand such movements borders more than one research area, and any broad research should take into account these latent elements and their manifestations.

Before tackling the matter of Sabbatai Zvi's movement, it is necessary to provide a short description of the messianic movements during the period previous to the birth of the most important messianic movement yet; the social and historic contexts in which such movements appeared are also contained herein below (Sharot, pp. 62-75).

- Abraham Abulafia, a Kabala practitioner³ from Spain, introduces himself as the Messiah of the Jews in Sicily, thus coming into conflict with the Jewish elites, as a result of his critical remarks towards the rulers and the rich members of the Sicilian society, only to be later on discredited (*ibid.*, 62). Abulafia believed in the messianic process which takes place within one's soul. “According to him, a Messianic event does not involve the interference of supernatural phenomena” (Idel, 1996, p. 30). Moshe Idel shows three explanations for Abulafia's Messianism: the circularity of time, which helps restore Israel's political independence; Aristotle's hypothesis where anything potential will sooner or later become an action, and that nations fall and rise, which would definitely be the case of the Jews. Such explanations “speak of a non-catastrophe driven thinking, contrary to popular beliefs and opinions identified in the Jewish escatologic texts in the Middle Ages and in the Talmud” (*ibid.*, p. 33).

³ “The term Kabala, originating in the Hebrew Qabbalah, is used today in order to define both Jewish mystic and the esoteric traditions of Judaism. Ever since the 12th century the term Kabbala has been used in reference to the theosophical mysticism which practised from the period onward (...), up to the point where it retroactively relates to all the esoteric movements and all forms of mystics born within Judaism ever since the latter's beginning until the recent ages” (Roland Goetschel, *Kabbala*, Editura de Vest, Timișoara, pp. 5-6, 1992).

- Don Isaac Abravanel, an important leader of the Jews expelled from Spain, studied the Messianic issue and reached the conclusion that the process of redemption would start in 1503. In his view Messiah would appear in Rome, following a series of wars between the Muslims, Christians and the ten tribes of Israel. The suffering endured by the Jews would indicate that salvation is imminent, as well as the coming of Messiah (Sharot, p. 63).
- Ascher Lamlein considers Messiah would arrive in six months, and the Jews must be ready for this and repent for redemption. According to certain sources, the disappointment among the Jews was so great that many of them converted to Christianity as a result (id.)
- Solomon Molcho had a sufficiently important reputation as messianic prophet. Born in a family of converted Christians, in Portugal, he got himself circumcised and left for Salonike where he studied Kabala. It seems he later on reached the conclusion that he is Messiah. In 1532, after the failure to have a meeting with the emperor, he was killed, but many refused to believe this. According to Sharot, after the killing of Molcho, millenarianism decreased in intensity (ibid., p. 65).

The expulsion of Jews from Spain constituted a tragic shock for the Jewish people, with serious consequences on the life of Jews in Italy and on the millenarian movements as such. Josy Eisenberg views this event as “the most terrible tragedy the Jews in Europe had ever suffered, before Hitler’s genocide” (Eisenberg, 1993, p. 222).

On the other hand, the expulsions, persecutions and interdictions that Jews had to go through are not a pre-requisite for the appearance of the phenomena of millenarianism and messianism within Jewish communities. Proof in this sense stand the Ashkenazim Jews “who were subject to a greater number of disasters and periods of persecution” (ibid., p. 68). Although the belief in the coming of Messiah was strong, “there were no influential predictions of, or preparations made for, his imminent coming” (id.).

The differences in how people related to millenarianism and messianic, how such latency was brought to life within the elites or the masses are to be made visible “in their cultural and religious orientations” (ibid., p. 69). Sharot explains such differences as depending on the level of schooling and culture the members of the respective Jewish communities had (most of Sephardim did not belong to the scholars’ communities), and on the level of self-perception found in the two communities. If the Sephardim can be described as proud, noble, and self-assertive, the Ashkenazim were humble, recluse and constantly concerned with the concept of sin. At the level of elites, Sephardim Rabbis were engaged in calculating the date when Messiah was to come, while the Ashkenazim refused to do so; also, the concern to calculate the precise date of Messiah’s coming belonged to esoteric circles which the masses had no access to. By being confronted with Christianity, the Sephardim Jews were faced with three choices: to convert to Christianity, die or

be expelled. Very few of them chose martyrdom, while history records important events evolving around expulsion and conversion. For the Ashkenazim Jews martyrdom became “an institutionalized ritual” (id.), but most of them preferred to opt for death as means of salvation, while even among these people one recalls a series of conversions to Christianity.

Sharot outlines the differences between Sephardim and Ashkenazim by also taking into account the social environment they would live in. The Ashkenazim Jews lived in peace with their host-countries for a relatively short period of time, only to be followed by crusades, persecutions and discrimination. These phenomena lead to the development of “their cultural distinctiveness and feelings of separateness from the dominant society” (ibid., p. 71). Sephardim managed to cohabitate in peace for a longer time, and they were even prosperous both during the Turkish occupation of Spain and after the country had been re-conquered by the Christians. “Feelings of superiority among the Sephardim did not stem only from their Judaism and Jewishness, as was the case among Ashkenazim, but also from their status and power within the larger society” (ibid., p. 73).

Because of the important role the Jews would play in the Spanish society, the shock produced by the mass killings in 1391, along with the persecutions and expulsions was far greater than that of Ashkenazim who had never truly experienced the feeling of full integration in a society, thus carrying along a distinct sense of “being different” than the societies they would dwell in.

A similar situation to the Jews in Spain occurred in Italy; in the 15th century and in the first half of the 16th century Jews were fully integrated in the Italian society, taking on a part of the culture they were sharing with the locals. However, due to the effects of the Counter-reform⁴ (barriers in exercising certain professions, living in ghettos, having to wear specific identification badges, and the burning of the Talmud in public), the Jews in Italy were suddenly confronted with total rejection from the part of the society that had initially accepted them. As in Spain, “the sufferings were interpreted as the birth pangs of the messiah” (ibid., p. 75).

The majority of the Jews who in Spain converted to Christianity, in 1391, – thus having to choose between death and conversion– laid the foundations of millenarianism and mystical phenomena in the 15th-16th centuries. Some of the converted Jews continued however to practice rituals in the Judaic religion. Among such people are marranos who influenced the Messianism in the 15th-16th centuries by using messianic and millenarian faiths since these were the only beliefs that could solve the issue of the cognitive dissonance in which they existed, namely their rejection by the two religions to which in fact they belonged (according to ibid., p. 82).

⁴ Counter-reform is a movement initiated in the 16th century by the Catholic Church as reaction to the Protestant Reform.

By shifting to a religion where they were forced to accept Jesus as Messiah, while originating from a religion where Messiah was awaited for, with the purpose to redeem the Jewish people, the converted Jews were put under double pressure both from the Christians, who looked upon them with suspicion, and from the rest of Jews whom they had left behind. Their only salvation – as seen by the marranos, lay beyond human powers- it was only up to a Messiah to bring them the so much awaited redemption. Therefore, “the desperate desire to retain their Jewishness, despite the dangers and fear of Inquisition, led them to believe in the miraculous appearance of messiah as their only hope” (ibid., p. 84).

SABBATAI ZVI AND THE MOST IMPORTANT JEWISH MESSIANIC MOVEMENT

In 1665 Nathan of Gaza has a revelation where God assigns him as prophet, and Sabbatai Zvi as Messiah; this led to the most important messianic movement in the history of the Jews. Within a few months after the said revelation, the news reaches Europe with the help of the connections between the various Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

In a work about the Sabbatian movement, which has become wide-known, Gershom Scholem asserts that “the ready acceptance of Sabbatai Zvi as the messiah was the consequence of the diffusion of the Lurianic Kabala throughout the Diaspora” (ibid., p. 95). Due to Isaac Luria⁵, in Kabala one finds a special interest in messianism after the Jews’ expulsion from Spain: thus, from a tradition intended for the elites, the Kabala becomes accessible to the masses, which in turn helps justify and understand the difficult history of the Jewish people. “The Lurianic ideas provided an answer to the fundamental question of the exile of the Jewish people: exile rooted in the process of creation and the struggle to become free from exile involved purging the cosmos of evil” (ibid., p. 97).

If the expulsions, mass killings and the flee of Jews all over Europe turned attention towards the awaiting for a Messiah who would save and unify the Jewish people, the anticlimaxes produced after each new catastrophe in the Jews’ history paved the path to a cosmic transposition of the phenomenon of redemption. The explanations used by Luria in his attempt to outline the historic and divine processes provide a framework where the events faced by the Jews become easily understandable.

Sharot considers that the marranos were put under multiple social pressure, starting with their integration into Christianity, acceptance of the faith, up to their relations with the other Jews as regards religion and the risks they were forced to

⁵ In the 16th century Isaac Luria develops with the help of Haim Vital a type of Kabala which “constitutes one of the most complex creations of Jewish thinking”, thus attempting to “come up with a theory related to each stage in the development of the world, from the most original of all – which takes place in the divinity itself- up to redemption” (Idel, p. 89).

take in order to secretly practice Judaic rituals. On the other hand, “by the belief in Zvi the former marranos declared their full commitment to Judaism and immediately put behind them the problems of adopting a complex system of religious rituals. The commitment to the Jewish messiah was the decisive test; their past was to be forgiven and forgotten, and they were now assured of redemption” (ibid., p. 109).

While Scholem assigns great importance to the Lurianic Kabala as a means of understanding the Messianic movement, Sharot’s opinion is that although it represents an important factor, the Lurianic Kabala is not the only decisive element for grasping this phenomenon. In this sense Sharot draws attention to the marranos immigration from Spain and Italy, along with other social factors and the economic crisis in the 16th century.

In 1666 Sabbatai Zvi is arrested by the Turks and imprisoned; the Turks propose that he convert to their religion in exchange for having his life spared. “Zvi denied having made a messianic claim and chose conversion” (ibid., p. 115). The shock of Zvi’s conversion initially made the others refuse to believe the accuracy of such piece of information, followed by profound disappointment which made some convert to Christianity, although the majority of Jews continued to believe they were still in exile, and some others simply did not admit they had made a mistake in relation to Zvi (according to Sharot). The explanation offered by Nathan, upon hearing the news, was that the respective conversion was a necessary part of Zvi’s messianic role; thus, Zvi accessed the land of evil in order to fight it. Sabbatai’s explanation, on the other hand, was that the conversion was not owed to outside forces, but to a revelation where he “was commanded to place himself under the authority of the Islamic law in order to punish Israel’s people who were incapable to comprehend the true doctrine of divinity” (Idel, 1996, p. 102).

As expected, the marranos continued to believe that Zvi was their Messiah even after his conversion and death because “his action was a repetition of their own biography and family histories” (ibid., p. 119). The history of the movement did not stop with Zvi’s death, but rather people continued to calculate the year when he would reappear and begin the redemption.

The evolution of the messianic idea in the thinking of the Jewish people contributes to the description of the dynamic evolution of religious experiences and the understanding of the way in which social realities was accepted, in view of the spiritual features the Jews have. All throughout history messianic ideas have been influenced by the contexts in which they were born, by the spiritual power of those who called out for the awaiting for Messiah and by the expectations which the Jews had in various social environments which in turn were severely influenced by persecution, discrimination and violence.

The messianic and the redemption latencies have been repeatedly brought to life in the Jewish history, in various contexts, leading to the unification of the people for the good of a common purpose, that of waiting for a Messiah. Whether

some of them believed Messiah had come, or denied his coming and contested the ones proclaiming themselves as Messiah, one thing remains a constant feature in the Jewish history: religious experience. The coming together of the Jews in this particular “spiritual place” provided strength to Jewish communities, which helped them understand and overcome whatever critical moments history may have laid before them, while at the same time the same strength made them keep their faith in the coming of the Messiah. By understanding the way in which such latencies can become a present reality, the necessity to live through such experiences and activate them with the help of spiritual learning, one can reach a proper level of comprehension of the spiritual power existing in the history of communities and peoples, thus providing an explanation for the latter’s survival in history.

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