

The Open Secret of Sabbatean Communal Leadership After 1666

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Abstract

Popular works of Jewish history have often portrayed the Sabbatean movement as all but disappearing after the apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi in 1666. The impression given by such works suggests that the few remaining believers went deep underground and were aggressively pursued by the rabbis. This paper marshals evidence that there were many believers remaining, including communal leaders; and that the pursuit of Sabbateans was generally lackluster.

Introduction

Many of the widely read English-language surveys of Jewish history suggest that after the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi to Islam in 1666, only a few followers continued to believe in Sabbatai's messianic mission. These adherents went deep underground, cunningly concealing their true beliefs. Rabbis and lay functionaries ferreted out remaining believers for punishment or excommunication. Occasionally a new Sabbatean figure would arise openly but he would be immediately cut down by the authorities.¹

1 See, e.g., Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews*, revised ed. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1968), 447; Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews*, revised ed. (New York: Schocken, 1970, 312–13, who is a bit more aware of later believers); Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 471–72. All these works, in their revised editions, post-date the appearance of the great classic, Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), whose Hebrew original appeared in 1956/7. Despite the fact that Scholem had written previously as well as at length in this book about

Scholars of Sabbateanism have long known that this is a misleading picture; indeed, the voluminous writings of Scholem, Benayahu, Liebes and others on post-apostasy Sabbateanism make that point abundantly clear. The purpose of this brief study is to gather evidence, mainly from easily available secondary and primary sources, in order to paint a clear overall picture of post-1666 Sabbatean communal leadership. It makes two arguments. First, the rabbinic leaders' search for underground Sabbateans was sporadic and often half-hearted. Second, a number of communal leaders between 1666 and the 1720s were Sabbateans whose commitment to the faith could easily have been discovered had anyone been looking for it.

The Aftermath of Sabbatai Zevi's Apostasy

Sabbatai's sudden apostasy to Islam in 1666 left his followers in shock. Each was faced with a set of choices: whether to believe the news at all; whether to maintain faith once the news was confirmed; whether to accept the explanations for Sabbatai's apostasy given by Nathan of Gaza, Abraham Miguel Cardoso, or other Sabbatean theologians; whether to wait and see what would happen or to adopt a more active stance; whether to adhere to Jewish law or to join in the ritual antinomianism of many believers; whether to view Sabbatai as a messiah or a deity; whether to convert to Islam in imitation of Sabbatai; and whether to persist in belief after Sabbatai's death in 1676. A significant number of Jews, especially scholars, remained fully committed to Sabbatai and Sabbatean theology through both the apostasy and the expiration of their messiah.² The movement was later carried on by people who had never faced these choices because they were quite young at the height of the movement or had not yet been born.

The choices changed over time. During the first several years after the apostasy, there was enough confusion and uncertainty that large portions of the Jewish community continued to expect salvation

the lively continuation of the movement after Sabbatai's apostasy, that story seems not to have truly penetrated into these popular histories.

2 See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, ch. 7.

through Sabbatai. Into the 1670s, almost every community in the Ottoman Empire and Italy still had a party of believers whose identities were generally well known. Prominent among these were rabbis, judges, and communal leaders.³ In some cities, the Sabbateans were in control. Scholem points out that much of the impetus to persecute believers came from the Istanbul rabbinate, while the rabbinates of many cities were quite conciliatory toward the faithful.⁴ This was probably because it was so easy to remind them of their own Sabbatean proclivities during 1665-66.

Over time, a series of events eroded the outer circles of “soft” believers, leaving those at the center ever more dedicated (on this subject see below). These events included the ban of excommunication on believers issued by several major rabbinical courts; the efforts by Sabbatai to convert Jewish followers to Islam; a series of failed predictions for specific dates of redemption; Sabbatai’s death in 1676; Nathan’s death in 1680; and the mass Dönme conversion in 1683.⁵

In addition to the element of time, place also played a major role in the changing nature of the community of the faithful. In the immediate aftermath of the apostasy, the further away from Istanbul one lived, the longer it took for the news to arrive, and the more people were inclined to disbelieve it. Distance also increased the odds that news had been tampered with. At greater distance, with more time between the apostasy and arrival of the news, outlying communities were also more likely to be exposed to the “spin” put on the conversion by Nathan and Cardoso. This might occur either before or very shortly after confirmed reports of Sabbatai’s apostasy arrived. Another spatial factor was the power and nature of the official rabbinate. The rabbinate in Istanbul, in close proximity to the sultan and the seat of Ottoman power, was far ahead of the rest of the Jewish world in condemning Sabbatai and issuing harsh bans on believers. Other communities varied greatly. There was also a certain territorialism that contributed to a contrarian attitude in some

3 Jacob Sasportas, *Zizat Novel Zevi*, ed. Isaiah Tishby [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1954), 318–20, 358.

4 See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 693–705.

5 See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, ch. 8.

quarters. Finally, the depth of a given community's faith at the height of the movement was often a good determinant of its Sabbatean character after the apostasy.

Additionally, it is not always possible to describe what it meant to be a believer for any given person. Sometimes our awareness of the faith of those who did not leave behind Sabbatean writings can only be derived by examining their actions. A series of incidents suggests that the rabbimates of many regions in both Europe and the Mediterranean were either believers, or (more likely) averted their eyes as Sabbatean activities occurred essentially in the open. These include the controversy over continuing Sabbatean ritual practices, such as the daily Priestly Benediction and midnight vigils with Sabbatean liturgy; the ability of Judah Hasid and Hayyim Malakh to mount a major Sabbatean 'Aliyah movement in 1700; the reception of the Sabbatean Nehemiah Hiyya Hayon; and the refusal of rabbis who should have known better to pay heed to the accusations made by Rabbis Moses Hagiz, Zevi Ashkenazi, and Jacob Emden.⁶ If rabbinic leaders had really been searching out and exposing Sabbateans, each of these situations should have occasioned an investigation which would quickly have exposed its Sabbatean nature.

Why to Expect Continued Sabbatean Leadership

The classic work on failed prophetic movements is *When Prophecy Fails*, by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter.⁷ This book

- 6 On the continuation of Sabbatean ritual practices in Amsterdam see Yacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 189–91, 249–51. On R. Judah Hasid, see Meir Benayahu, "The 'Holy Brotherhood' of R. Judah Hasid and Their Settlement in Jerusalem," *Sefunot* 3–4 (1961): 131–82; Alexandr Putik, "Prague Jews and Judah Hasid: A Study on the Social, Political and Religious History of the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Judaica Bohemiae* 38 (2002-3): 72–105, 39 (2003-4): 53–92, 46:1 (2011): 33–72. On Hakham Moses Hagiz, see Elisheva Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the Sabbatian Controversies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). On Rabbi Jacob Emden, see Jacob J. Schacter, "Rabbi Jacob Emden: Life and Major Works" (unpublished PhD diss., Harvard University, 1988).
- 7 Leon Festinger et al., *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956 [reprint: New York: Harper, 1966]). Sabbatai is discussed on 8–12.

posits that prophetic movements almost never die with the failure of their central prophecies. They rather continue in even more vigorous forms. Festinger and his colleagues actually cite the example of the Sabbatean movement to support this thesis. Their understanding of its dynamics is erroneous because they did not have Scholem's main work available, but they are absolutely correct to use Sabbateanism as a model of the pattern. Some Sabbateans were so deeply invested in their faith that it seemed impossible to them that they could have been mistaken. When the news of Sabbatai's apostasy was verified, and later, when Sabbatai died, these apparent disconfirmations frightened off the less committed outer circles of believers. The inner circles, however, doubled down and eagerly accepted the explanations offered for the apparent defeats by Nathan of Gaza, Abraham Miguel Cardoso, and others.⁸

Who were the members of these inner circles? A large proportion of the truly committed were rabbis of what Moshe Idel calls the "secondary elite."⁹ While ordinary Jews thronged to the Sabbatean faith at the height of the public movement in 1665-66, their understanding of the meaning of Sabbatai's mission, the prophecies of Nathan and Cardoso, and the very significance of the messiah would often have been quite shallow. The credulity of scholars, however, was surely pushed to its limits by Sabbatai's "strange deeds," culminating in his apostasy. Those acts, however, were expounded in a positive manner by Sabbatai, Nathan and Cardoso, using the highly ductile imagery of Kabbalah. Rabbis who understood and accepted these explanations became far more invested in the faith than ordinary Jews who did not have all this spiritual infrastructure.

Sabbateanism had, in fact, been a rabbinic movement from the outset. Sabbatai was a rabbinic scholar. Nathan of Gaza was a highly

8 The extremely important work of Dr. Noam Lefler makes a strong case that one of the central Sabbatean narratives explaining Sabbatai's (apparent) death, the doctrine of his occultation, was originally formulated by Samuel Ber Perlhefter rather than by Nathan of Gaza as scholars thought until now. See Lefler, "Studies in the Sabbatean Doctrine of Occultation" [Hebrew] (unpublished PhD diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2020).

9 See e.g. Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 201-2.

accomplished and respected rabbi at the tender age of 22 when the movement began. The witnesses to the 1665 Shavu'ot night prophecy by Nathan, who both spearheaded and spread belief in Sabbatai's messianic mission, were rabbis. In fact, throughout the movement's height in 1665-66, it is rare to find leading figures who were not rabbis, cantors or communal functionaries. This was not always the case with Jewish messianic movements. Neither Asher Laemlein Reutlingen nor David Reubeni, messiahs of the early sixteenth century, was a rabbi, nor were the leaders of those movements mainly from the scholarly elites. This is also the case concerning Frankism, several of the Hasidic messianic movements, most of the medieval messianic movements, and the Yemenite movements.¹⁰ Sabbatean rabbis and communal leaders, on the other hand, took center stage from the beginning. They would also be the ones to carry on after the apparent failures of Sabbatai's apostasy and death. It should therefore not be terribly surprising to find Sabbatean communal leaders after the apostasy.

Pattern of Pursuit and Ignorance

Elisheva Carlebach has collected a number of testimonies by rabbis of this era who state that they had long been aware of the Sabbatean commitments of certain individuals but took no action. The general attitude of Jewish leaders, they say, was to sweep such knowledge under the rug. The Sabbatean commitments of Nehemiah Hiyya Hayon, whose writings were the occasion for a huge uproar around 1713, were known much earlier by Rabbis Benjamin ha-Levi of Izmir, Netanel ha-Levi of Pesaro, Joseph Ergas of Pisa, and an unknown Livornese correspondent of Rabbi Abraham Segre. Amazingly, Rabbi Moses Hagiz himself, the great heresy hunter, said that at the outset of the Hayon episode, the rabbis had no interest in creating a public scandal of the matter. Netanel ha-Levi's comment is most revealing:

I did not speak of this to anyone because it was the way of that generation to sit in the study halls and suppress such matters in

10 On these movements see Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

fulfillment of the verse, *and he who is wise at that time will remain silent*. I had known about these matters since my youth, but I had kept the words guarded in my heart.¹¹

Hagiz, Emden, and others make similar statements concerning the general policy of silence about knowledge of Sabbateans before the explosion of anti-Sabbateanism in 1713.¹² Even the most fiery of anti-Sabbateans, Jacob Sasportas, reports his own decision to remain silent in the face of the continued activities of the believers. After extensive attempts to rein in Rabbi Jacob Sa'adun of Salé, the leader of the believers in that North African city, Sasportas states, "I did not bother to respond to him concerning his absurdities, for I reasoned, *Do not answer a fool according to his folly [or you yourself will be just like him. Proverbs 26:4]*"¹³

This situation did not necessarily change after 1713. A dozen years after the outbreak of the Hayon affair, Sabbatean literature for distribution was discovered in the possession of a wandering bookseller in Mannheim and Frankfurt. This literature included material from the rising star of the Prague rabbinate, Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschütz. Pawel Maciejko states that, "Among the rabbinic authorities of the period, Hagiz and Michael Hasid were the only ones who advocated the public exposure of clandestine Sabbatians in general and an attack on a prominent rabbinic figure such as Rabbi Jonathan [Eibeschütz] in particular."¹⁴ We know already that this was not always true of Hagiz. Emden, later to be known as Eibeschütz's inveterate pursuer, said of Eibeschütz's manuscript *Va-Avo Hayom el ha-'Ayin* in 1724, "The book is the work of heresy and sacrilege and it certainly deserves to be burned, but I advised him not to make his objections public, because nothing good would come out of it and it would likely only cause damage."¹⁵ Clearly the idea of a vigilant rabbinate seeking out and exposing Sabbateans loses any validity in the face of such evidence.

11 Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy*, 78.

12 Carlebach, *Pursuit of Heresy*, 76–80.

13 Sasportas, *Zizat Novel Zevi*, 359.

14 Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschütz, 'And I Came This Day Unto the Fountain,' critically edited and introduced by Pawel Maciejko (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2014), ix.

15 Eibeschütz, 'And I Came This Day,' ix.

Sasportas gave up his attack on Sa'adun largely because he could get little support from the establishment rabbinate in his campaign against the believers. This was not surprising at the height of the public phase of the movement, when most of the rabbis either believed in Sabbatai or wished to stand aside and await developments. Sasportas was absolutely mystified, however, that the rabbinate was still fighting him rather than the Sabbateans, years after the apostasy. This was not the case in Salé alone but in many communities. It turns out that all the leading anti-Sabbatean activists struggled to obtain any support from establishment rabbis or leaders. When Hagiz and several leading scholars produced proofs of Nehemiah Hayon's outrageous Sabbatean heresy, the lay leadership in Amsterdam viewed the attack on Hayon as an incursion on its own sovereign power over the community.¹⁶ Again and again these zealots were given only the most tepid support by communal leaders, both lay and rabbinic. Sometimes they were openly opposed and often they found themselves marginalized or even exiled as a result of their anti-Sabbatean efforts. This is additional clear evidence that Jewish leaders were not interested in hunting Sabbateans.

There are many other situations in which we have no direct testimony about the lackluster or fragmentary pursuit of Sabbateans by establishment leaders, but the lassitude of the rabbis reveals their true disposition. Three examples will give a sense of this.

The home and circle of Rabbi Abraham Rovigo in Modena was a central hub of Sabbateanism in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Rovigo and his very close friend, Benjamin Kohen Vitale of Reggio, were among the most prominent Italian Sabbateans. They were students of the leading Western European kabbalist, Rabbi Moses Zacuto (1625-1697). Zacuto had flirted with Sabbateanism at the height of the movement but moved away from it with Sabbatai's apostasy.¹⁷ He was in close touch with his two disciples and was well aware of their Sabbatean beliefs. He took no steps, however, to punish them, persecute them, or reveal their beliefs. Meanwhile, believers

16 Carlebach, *Pursuit of Heresy*, 104-16.

17 See Gershom Scholem, "The Attitude of Rabbi Moses Zacuto to Sabbateanism," in Scholem, *Researches in Sabbateanism*, ed. Y. Liebes [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1991), 510-29; Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988), 449-50.

from all over Europe and the Ottoman Empire came to Rovigo's study hall to learn the latest news in the movement and teach the doctrines they had learned from Nathan of Gaza or his apprentices. What is more, for decades Rovigo was host and mentor to a series of Sabbatean *ba'alei maggid* — men who channeled heavenly spirits which revealed Sabbatean secrets from the supernal realm. His home was thus not only a clearinghouse for Sabbatean rumors and teachings, but was a fountainhead of new intelligence which would then be distributed and debated across Sabbatean circles. Rovigo made certain efforts to keep his Sabbatean commitments hidden, but if there had been even a moderate effort to uncover the believers, Rovigo could hardly have remained incognito for long. Zacuto, or any of the scores of visitors, *ba'alei maggid*, suspicious neighbors, or numerous correspondents, could have revealed his secret and uncovered the entire network. No circle of that size and complexity could have held up to careful scrutiny — but there was none. Anti-Sabbatean heresy hunters would have been reluctant to go after Rovigo for other reasons as well. There is no indication that he was a heretic in any sense. He was an important scholar and a wealthy community leader.¹⁸

Another example of the lackluster pursuit of Sabbateans in the period is the case of the Hevra Kaddisha of Rabbi Judah Hasid. This

18 On Rovigo and his circle see inter alia [all in Hebrew]: Meir Benayahu, *The Shabbatean Movement in Greece* (=Sefunot 14/NS 4) (1977): passim; idem, "Sabbatean Rumors from the Notebooks of Rabbi Benjamin ha-Kohen and Rabbi Abraham Rovigo," *Michael* 1 (1972): 9–77; Jacob Mann, "The Stay of Rabbi Abraham Rovigo and his Entourage in Jerusalem in 1702," *Zion* 6 (1934): 59–84; Gershom Scholem, *Halomotav shel ha-shabta'i R. Mordecai Ashkenazi: 'Al devar pinkas ha-halomot shel R. Mordecai Ashkenazi, talmido shel R. Avraham Rovigo* (Leipzig: Schocken, 1938); idem, "On the Italian Sabbateans at the end of the Seventeenth Century and on Rabbi Elijah Mojajon" in Scholem, *Researches*, 564–7 (including Liebes's thorough notes); idem, "Lesson 38" in Scholem, *Parashat ha-Shabta'ut*, ed. and annotated Avi Elqayam (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2018), 303–9; Isaiah Sonne, "On the History of Sabbateanism in Italy," in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew section (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1943), 89–103; idem, "New Material on Sabbatai Zevi from a Notebook of R. Abraham Rovigo," *Sefunot* 3–4 (1961): 39–70; Isaiah Tishby, "R. Meir Rofe's Letters of 1675–80 to R. Abraham Rovigo," *Sefunot* 3–4 (1961): 71–130; idem, "The First Sabbatean 'Magid' in the Study Hall of R. Abraham Rovigo," in idem, *Paths of Faith and Heresy: Essays in Kabbalah and Sabbateanism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 81–107.

was a migration of scores if not hundreds of European Jews to Palestine in 1700. The caravan or traveling camp of participants built up over several years under the charismatic leadership of Hasid and his fellow leader, Hayyim Malakh. Malakh was a disciple of Benjamin ha-Kohen of Reggio as well as of Samuel Primo, Barukhiah Russo, and Abraham Miguel Cardoso — all leading Sabbatean theologians. Malakh was ultimately a radical Sabbatean heretic, a follower of Primo, and apparently brought Hasid into that camp as well. Hasid preached with great charisma and success around Poland as the group moved slowly westward. The whole ‘*aliyah*’ project was inspired by Sabbatean motives. Many if not most of the participants were Sabbateans. Some Polish rabbis knew of the group’s true nature. Rabbi Saul of Krakow wrote to the Hakham Zevi Ashkenazi in Altona to request help in responding to the Hevra Kaddisha and was advised to harass them. This approach was successful to the degree that the group left Poland for Germany; or perhaps they were headed that way in any case. If the Polish rabbinate knew that Hasid and Malakh were Sabbateans, why did they not alert the German and Palestinian rabbis? Perhaps they did and were ignored. Amazingly, it took another decade for the Sabbatean character of the Hasid entourage to be publicly acknowledged in Europe. When this occurred, the leaders expressed shock at the discovery. In the years leading up to 1700, though, they were clearly busy with some other occupation because — like the Sabbatean nature of the Rovigo circle — the “secret” of the Hevra Kaddisha was not hidden very deeply.¹⁹

A third example brings home the point that the rabbinic leaders were looking the other way rather than searching for Sabbateans. Saloniki became the leading Ottoman center of the movement after Sabbatai’s death. In 1683 (and/or 1686) hundreds of Saloniki Jews, including a significant group of important rabbis, converted to Islam in imitation of Sabbatai’s apostasy. They were not the first; individuals and smaller groups had done this since 1666. Aside from the size of

19 Benayahu, “Hevra Kaddisha”; Putik, “Prague Jews and Judah Hasid”; Jacob J. Schacter, “Motivations for Radical Anti-Sabbateanism: The Case of Hakham Zevi Ashkenazi,” in *The Sabbatean Movement and Its Aftermath: Messianism, Sabbateanism and Frankism*, ed. Rachel Elior, vol. 2 (=Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, vol. 17) (Jerusalem: Institute of Jewish Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2001), 41*.

the faction, however, the distinguished standing of many participants made this mass apostasy noteworthy. Among them was Rabbi Joseph Filosof, a respected rabbi and son-in-law of Saloniki's most distinguished rabbinic scholar, Barukh Angel. Filosof was Sabbatai Zevi's father-in-law! His son, Rabbi Jacob Filosof, was believed to have absorbed Sabbatai's soul after the death of the latter.²⁰ They were joined in apostasy by the highly respected Rabbi Solomon Florentin. These rabbis had not troubled themselves much to hide their Sabbatean commitments before 1683 either. Nathan visited Saloniki and found allies as well as students. For years before the mass apostasy, the city was home to the leading Sabbatean *yeshivah*. Could the Sabbatean nature of large proportions of the Jewish population and rabbinate in Saloniki — known as *'ir ve-em be-yisra'el* [a city and mother in Israel] — have remained unknown to the Jewish leaders everywhere? It is only imaginable if the rabbis and leaders were not only neglecting to search, but were averting their gaze.²¹

Clearly, there was no organized and concerted anti-Sabbatean campaign before 1713. The typical rabbinic response to knowledge of Sabbatean believers was rather to stay silent. We will now look at some of the reasons that might have been the case.

Why Was the Hunt So Sporadic?

The pursuit of Sabbatean believers varied greatly in different places and periods. The inquiry was altogether inconsistent even in the same region and time. The rabbinic court of Venice interrogated Nathan of Gaza and actively persecuted him while the rabbis of Modena, Ancona, and Reggio were barely disguised believers. The rabbinate of Istanbul was busy excommunicating Sabbateans while the rabbinate of Saloniki was full of them. Certain rabbinic courts (Istanbul, Venice) or individual rabbis (Sasportas, Hagiz, Emden) became ardent pursuers of Sabbatean heretics while other courts and rabbis looked the other way. A glance at some of the conundrums and frustrations facing even the zealous courts and rabbis can suggest reasons that Sabbatean-hunting might have been regarded as a fool's errand.

20 See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 149.

21 See Scholem, *Researches*, ch. 4; Benayahu, *The Shabbatean Movement in Greece*.

Early in the post-apostasy phase of the Sabbatean movement, dissembling became a standard tool of the believers. Known Sabbateans are, for example, repeatedly listed among the rabbis who publicly decry the movement and call for its extirpation. Even if the heresy-hunters suspected such duplicity, however, they tended to tread lightly when it came to suspected Sabbateans who were community leaders. Four main reasons might explain this. First, the leading individual rabbinic heresy hunters — Sasportas, Hagiz and Emden — were in relatively weak leadership positions at the time they commenced these activities. They therefore had little leverage. Hagiz, for example, could not get the Council of Four Lands or the Chief Rabbi of Prague to respond to his letters. Second, many if not most communal leaders had been believers during 1665-6, so the ongoing investigation shamed them all. Third, exposure of such figures would be a scandal and embarrassment to the community as well as to its leaders. Finally, a powerful Sabbatean communal leader could turn the tables and damage the reputation of his detractors.

This fourth scenario indeed played out multiple times. Sasportas was deeply hated and barely avoided violent attacks at the height of the movement.²² Hakham Zevi Ashkenazi and his son Jacob Emden lost rabbinic positions because of their fearless anti-Sabbatean campaigns.²³ Hagiz was kept at the margins of rabbinic leadership for his efforts. The two most famous cases of Sabbatean persecution boomeranged. In the case of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, the subject turned out not to be a Sabbatean.²⁴ In the case of Jonathan Eibeschütz, the pursued proved more powerful than his pursuers.²⁵

In addition to these factors, there were many versions of Sabbatean faith after 1666. Scholars of the movement from Scholem

22 See Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi*, ch. 2–3.

23 See Carlebach, *Pursuit of Heresy*, Ch. 4–5; Jacob J. Schacter, “Rabbi Jacob Emden: Life and Major Works” (unpublished PhD diss., Harvard University, 1988), ch. 5.

24 See Isaiah Tishby, “Luzzatto’s Attitude to Shabateanism,” in Tishby, *Messianic Mysticism: Moses Hayyim Luzzatto and the Padua School* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2008), 223–53.

25 See e.g. Scholem, *Researches*, ch. 8; idem, *Kabbalah*, 405–8; Eibeschütz, ‘*And I Came This Day*,’ *passim*.

to Maciejko have emphasized the heretical facets of Sabbateanism.²⁶ Even after Sabbatai's apostasy, however, there were many believers who were neither heretics, nor antinomians, nor apostates. Some of these figures were rabbis of considerable stature, such as Abraham Rovigo of Modena.²⁷ Rabbinic leaders in other communities may have felt little impetus to investigate colleagues who were — certainly to all appearances — orthodox community leaders.

It is not contrary to Judaism's laws or traditions to believe that some given person is the messiah, even if that belief is misguided. This truth is famously exemplified in the Talmud by Rabbi Akiva's faith in Simeon Bar Kokhba.²⁸ Sabbateanism, like early Christianity, subsumed forms which were heretical and forms which were not. Here part of the problem lay in determining what heresy is. Most rabbis could agree that those who believed Sabbatai to be a deity crossed the line into heresy. Other Sabbatean ideas and practices were more difficult to categorize. Those who followed Sabbatai's "strange deeds" by practicing ritual antinomianism — such as eating precisely an olive's weight of leaven on Passover — deliberately broke Jewish law. Did their beliefs concerning the status of Jewish law make them heretics? They had Talmudic precedents to indicate that *halakhah* would change when the messiah appeared.²⁹ What of those who turned the fast of 9 Av into a day of feasting, as Sabbatai had taught? This is a change explicitly predicted in the Midrash for the End of Days. Those who converted to Islam broke with their people, but the great Maimonides himself had said that Islam is not idolatry. Did such an apostasy (or the appearance of one) constitute heresy? Perhaps, then, someone in pursuit of heresy would have a difficult time distinguishing which

26 See e.g. Gershom Scholem, "Redemption Through Sin," in Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 78–141 (originally published in Hebrew in *Keneset II* [1937]: 347–92); *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*, ed. P. Maciejko (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017).

27 See note 18 above.

28 See e.g. Richard G. Marks, *The Image of Bar-Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature: False Messiah and National Hero* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

29 See e.g. *Vaykira Rabba* 13:3 and 32:10 (Margolioth edition); *Midrash Tehillim* 146:4; Rabbi Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le-Avraham* (Amsterdam, 1685), 13c–14a, cited in Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 255.

Sabbateans were dogmatically problematic and which were merely mistaken about who the messiah would be.

Finally, Judaism was already beginning to encounter existential struggles of identity during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when all this was occurring. This was the age of the *Kol Sakhal*, of da Costa and Spinoza, of growing acculturation and massive Jewish displacement. In such circumstances, and before the advent of Jacob Frank, some leaders may have seen the underground Sabbateans as more of an annoyance or embarrassment than as a threat.³⁰

In short, a rabbi or rabbinic court was taking enormous chances in deciding to pursue Sabbatean leaders. The believers would dissimulate. Some were powerful or beloved and could ruin the lives of their pursuers. Bringing up the Sabbatean episode in public was embarrassing to Jewish communities and even more so to the rabbis. It was difficult to know whether a particular Sabbatean was actually a heretic, which was the main rationale for stirring up a controversy. The pursuit of heresy could distract leaders from greater threats. What was there to gain by reviving the ugly flames of Sabbatean strife? Ultimately, the most assiduous pursuers were those who had the least to lose — rabbis near the margins of the community — and who were therefore the least effective. There were certainly situations in which leading rabbis joined the fray, but in many such cases these were the voices of compromise and conciliation.

Some Sabbatean Communal Leaders

Several communal leaders with barely disguised Sabbatean views have already come up in the discussion: Abraham Rovigo, Benjamin ha-Kohen of Reggio, Jacob Sad'un, Jonathan Eibeschutz, Judah Hasid, Hayyim Malakh, Joseph and Jacob Filosof, and Solomon Florentin. As sections 7-8 of Scholem's massive biography of Sabbatai cover the period from 1666 to 1676, I will focus on figures who were active after that time. Here are a few examples of the many which could be cited.

30 See David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), ch. 4, "Crisis of Rabbinic Authority."

Two individuals from the background of Jonathan Eibeschütz are exemplary cases. First is Samuel Issahar Ber ben Judah Moses Perlhefter (ca. 1650 - ca. 1713). He was born and educated in Prague. His family was not, in fact, named Perlhefter — this was his wife's family name which he adopted — but rather Eibeschütz. His relationship with Jonathan Eibeschütz is not yet clear but the family was not then so large as to make any distance of kinship likely. Ber was serving as a rabbinic judge in Wandsbek, Germany, in the late 1660s. He was apparently in Vienna when the Jewish community was expelled in 1670. Ber and Bella were back in Prague between 1670 and 1674. From fall of 1674 to winter of 1676, Ber was in Altdorf tutoring the Hebraist Johann Wagenseil. He left Germany and arrived at Rovigo's home in Modena in the winter of 1676 and remained until fall of 1681. There Ber channeled a Sabbatean *maggid*, a heavenly spirit, which revealed secrets about Sabbatai Zevi and the messianic future. Recent research by Isaiah Tishby, Avi Elqayam, and Noam Lefler shows that Ber was not only a conduit for Sabbatean messages from the supernal realms, but probably the architect of important Sabbatean doctrines as well. He was a public figure known widely in Northern Italy as a mystic and interpreter of secrets.

Ber subsequently served as a rabbi in Mantua, as his father had done before him. He was eventually forced to leave Italy because of a fight over the messianic status of his erstwhile friend Mordecai Eisenstadt. Ber eventually returned to Prague where he was appointed a rabbinic judge, a position formerly held by his grandfather. All indications are that he was well respected there.³¹ Whatever his familial relationship with Jonathan Eibeschütz, Ber was clearly a longstanding Sabbatean — even a prophet — who held leadership positions in several important communities.

A second figure of interest from Jonathan Eibeschütz's background is Rabbi Me'ir Eisenstadt (ca. 1670-1744), one of the leading Ashkenazi scholars of his time. Eisenstadt had been a rabbi

31 Isaiah Tishby, "The First Sabbatean 'Maggid' in the Study-Hall of Rabbi Abraham Rovigo," in Tishby, *Paths of Faith and Heresy* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 81-107; Avi Elqayam, "The Rebirth of the Messiah," *Kabbalah* 1 (1996): 85-166; Lefler, "Studies" passim; Ber and Bella Perlhefter, *Be'er Sheva*, ed. and trans. and introduced by Nathanael Riemer (Berlin: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

and head of a *yeshivah* in Poland and Germany but had to flee Worms ahead of the French invasion. He ended up in 1702 as rabbi in Prossnitz, Moravia, where he was Jonathan Eibeschütz's teacher and foster father. He later became rabbi of the city of Eisenstadt, where his *yeshivah* became extremely successful. While back in Prossnitz, Eisenstadt had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Sabbatean preacher and prophet Leibele Prossnitz. Leibele openly taught Sabbatean beliefs and predicted the return of the messiah in 1706. Letters from Leibele to Eibeschütz were found together with Eibeschütz's manuscript *Ve'avo Hayom el ha-'Ayin* in 1724 (see above), indicating a warm relationship. While Meir Eisenstadt did eventually disassociate from Leibele when the latter became very radical, there is no reason to think that Eisenstadt abandoned his Sabbatean commitments. He was certainly a Sabbatean for an important period of his years as a communal leader; he was extremely close with Jonathan Eibeschütz; and he showed no interest in attacking the Sabbatean Leibele Prossnitz until the latter became highly radical.³²

The congregations of the Land of Israel were not free of Sabbatean leaders. The evidence from Abraham Rovigo's notebooks from the 1680s and 1690s indicates that many of the respected fundraisers who left the Holy Land to collect funds from communities all over the diaspora were Sabbatean operatives who spread the faith as they traveled. Rabbi David Yitzhaki, one of Sabbatai's most dedicated supporters throughout his life, and a student of Nathan of Gaza's teachings, was a leader in Edirne and possibly in Saloniki as well. In 1687 he settled in Jerusalem, where he served as a judge on the rabbinic court for years. He was highly respected, but again, after his decades-long association with Sabbateanism in Greece, his commitment to the faith could hardly have been a great secret. Scholem contends that many rabbinic leaders in Jerusalem and Safed during this period were Sabbateans.³³

The case of Elijah Mojajon (Muchacheon) shows the international scope of Sabbatean training and leadership in the late seventeenth

32 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 441–42; EJ s.v. "Eisenstadt, Meir," vol. 6, columns 549–50.

33 Scholem, *History of the Sabbatian Movement*, ed. Jonatan Meir and Shinichi Yamamoto (Tel-Aviv: JTS-Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 2018), 240–41; idem, *Researches*, 190–202; Benayahu, *Shabatean Movement in Greece*, 50.

century. Mojajon was a native of either Greece or Ancona, born around 1663. He studied in Saloniki under Rabbi Solomon Florentin, who would shortly afterward become a leader among the Dönme, those Sabbateans who converted to Islam. Mojajon apparently also learned briefly with Nathan of Gaza shortly before Nathan's death. Mojajon came to Italy as a young rabbi. There he spent time with the two ardent Sabbateans, Abraham Rovigo of Modena and Benjamin ha-Kohen Vitale of Reggio. In 1692 Mojajon was in Bayonne, where the community had for the first time been permitted the appointment of a rabbi. It is possible that Mojajon was called there for that purpose. In 1693 he was in Amsterdam. By 1696 he was serving as rabbi in Ancona, where he followed in the footsteps of that city's earlier rabbi, Mehalalel Halleluyah, a very enthusiastic Sabbatean throughout his life. Mojajon corresponded with fellow Sabbateans and composed important Sabbatean writings.³⁴

Mojajon's companion from the Saloniki days, and one of the most influential Sabbateans in Western Europe, was Rabbi Solomon Ayllon. He was born, probably in Saloniki, around 1655. It appears that he converted to Islam with the Dönme in 1683, and Moses Hagiz claims that he contracted a highly irregular marriage while with that group. (Ayllon's own subsequent writings support that claim.) He abandoned the Dönme and returned to Jewish life but remained an enthusiastic Sabbatean. He followed the familiar route from Greece to the home of Rovigo in Modena, apparently spending time in the Palestinian city of Safed on the way. In Rovigo's home, Ayllon revealed Sabbatean secrets from Nathan of Gaza and composed a work of Sabbatean theology. He moved on from Modena to Amsterdam, where emissaries from the young Spanish and Portuguese congregation of London found him and hired him as their rabbi. He served in London from 1689 to 1699, when he was brought back to the highly prestigious Amsterdam Portuguese community to serve as its rabbi. He remained in that position until his death in 1728. When the radical Sabbatean author Nehemiah Hiyya Hayon appeared in Amsterdam in 1713, he was supported — if with some hesitation — by Ayllon. When Ayllon was attacked by Hagiz and other anti-Sabbatean activists, the Sephardic

34 Benayahu, *Shabatean Movement in Greece*, 138–46; Scholem, "On the Italian Sabbateans."

community rallied around its rabbi and turned its powers against the detractors. Ayllon remained in contact with the Sabbatean network and wrote Sabbatean-related material into the 18th century.³⁵

To return to where this paper began, here is what Moses Hagiz has to say about Ayllon and the way he himself handled the knowledge of Ayllon's Sabbateanism:

The sins of this generation brought it about that one of the holy congregations of Israel was taken in by him and employed him. When the sages of Israel heard of the matter, they turned a blind eye as if they knew nothing of the matter. (It is possible — nay, almost certain — that this deliberate obliviousness has been the cause of all these sorrows we suffer at present from this villain. Still, the Lord God knows, and Israel will know that when the congregation consulted me in 499 of the minor count [1698/9], I only withheld my testimony [against Ayllon] out of a desire not to impede penitents. I said, since he has already risen, he should not be toppled, out of honor for the congregation that erred unknowingly.)³⁶

Hagiz, then, the great Sabbatean hunter, knew all about the Sabbatean beliefs of Ayllon in 1698/9, but did not speak out. He suggests that other rabbis knew as well, and blames the post-Hayon mess on their reticence.

35 See Benayahu, *Shabatean Movement in Greece*, 147–60; Yael Nadav, "A Kabbalistic Treatise of R. Solomon Ayllion," *Sefunot* 3-4 (1960): 301-348; Carlebach, *Pursuit of Heresy*, 114-116; Lefler, "Studies" passim; Matt Goldish, "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in the 1689 London Sermons of Hakham Solomon Aailion," in *Tradition, Heterodoxy and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period* ed. C. Goodblatt and H. Kreisel (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), 139–65; idem, "An Historical Irony: Solomon Aailion's Court Tries the Case of a Repentant Sabbatean," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 27:1-2 (1993): 5–12; idem, "Jews, Christians and *Conversos*: Rabbi Solomon Aailion's Struggles in the Portuguese Community of London," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 45:2 (1994): 227–57.

36 Moses Hagiz, *Shever Posh'im* (Amsterdam, 1719), 37v.

Conclusion

This brief paper has only touched the surface of the evidence concerning Sabbatean communal leaders after 1666. The rabbis of the period attest that there was an unspoken policy to look the other way regarding such figures. There is, furthermore, abundant evidence from their actions that the official rabbinate often turned a blind eye toward Sabbatean community leaders. There were campaigns to find and excommunicate Sabbateans, to be sure, but these tended to flare up and die down. The leading heresy hunters were not the most prestigious rabbis and had a hard time getting others on board with the pursuit. There were a number of powerful reasons that a rabbi of the period might not want to involve himself in such hunts. Meanwhile, a mountain of evidence points to the fact that there were many Sabbatean communal leaders from Sabbatai's apostasy in 1666 until the 1730s, and that most of the time they remained undisturbed.