



DOSSIÊ ESPECIAL

ANARCHISM AND THE SABBATEAN HERESY

*EL ANARQUISMO Y LA HEREJÍA SABATEANA**ANARQUISMO E A HERESIA SABATEANA*James Rolla Martel  San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, United States
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Abstract

In this paper, I look at the events surrounding the false messiah Sabbatai Sevi. I argue that this phenomenon, along with other instances of false messianism, are a critical resource for Judaism, an anarchist subcurrent that serves to undermine the certainties that otherwise lead to archism, a system of domination and oppression based on assumptions that are not grounded in truth. I contrast the readings of Sabbateanism by Gershom Scholem, a scholar who saw Sevi as a force of negation that ultimately led to concrete practices with Walter Benjamin's more radical sense of negation that permanently disallows becoming something beyond doubt. Whereas Scholem's reading, I argue, perpetuates archism, Benjamin's reading is anarchist.

Keywords

Anarchism; archism; false Messiah; Walter Benjamin; Gershom Scholem.

Resumen

En este artículo, analizo los acontecimientos que rodearon al falso mesías Sabbatai Sevi. Sostengo que este fenómeno, junto con otros casos de falso mesianismo, constituye un recurso crucial para el judaísmo, una subcorriente anarquista que sirve para socavar las certezas que, de otro modo, conducen al arquismo, un sistema de dominación y opresión basado en suposiciones carentes de fundamento. Contrasto las interpretaciones del sabateísmo de Gershom Scholem, un académico que veía a Sevi como una fuerza de negación que, en última instancia, conducía a prácticas concretas, con el sentido de negación más radical de Walter Benjamin, que impide permanentemente la transformación en algo incuestionable. Mientras que la interpretación de Scholem, sostengo, perpetúa el arquismo, la de Benjamin es anarquista.

Palabras clave

Anarquismo; arquismo; falso Mesías; Walter Benjamin; Gershom Scholem.

Resumo

Neste artigo, analiso os eventos que cercam o falso messias Sabbatai Sevi. Argumento que esse fenômeno, juntamente com outros exemplos de falso messianismo, constitui um recurso crucial para o judaísmo, uma corrente secundária anarquista que serve para minar as certezas que, de outra forma, levariam ao arquisismo, um sistema de dominação e opressão baseado em pressupostos sem fundamento na verdade. Contrasto as interpretações do sabatismo feitas por Gershom Scholem, um estudioso que via Sevi como uma força de negação que, em última instância, conduzia a práticas concretas, com a concepção mais radical de negação de Walter Benjamin, que impede permanentemente o devir algo além da dúvida. Enquanto a leitura de Scholem, argumento, perpetua o arquisismo, a leitura de Benjamin é anarquista.

Palavras-chave

Anarquismo; arquisismo; falso Messias; Walter Benjamin; Gershom Scholem.

Introduction

Judaism and anarchism may, in some sense, seem like polar opposites. Rabbinical Judaism, at least since the destruction of the second temple, has been preoccupied with not breaking any of God's laws (and there are over 600 of them) while anarchism seems to be about evading the law however possible.¹ Yet, this apparent paradox does a disservice both to Judaism and the anarchist tradition insofar as one of the key components of Jewish thought has always been to question and struggle with the law and one of the ongoing mainstays of anarchism, is not the abandonment of laws and rules so much as their reintegration as collective and everchanging. To conflate Judaism with being only a rigorous and clear set of laws that must be obeyed in all instances, along with thinking of anarchism as pure chaos misses not only core elements of both Judaism and anarchism but also misses a critical way in which they can be interconnected.

In what follows, I will be arguing that there is a distinct anarchist trend within Judaism that is connected to its tradition of false messiahs. While Judaism is formally a messianic religion, its history has been marked, not by actual messiahs, but only false ones. Whereas these episodes of false messianism are often read as disasters, such incidents—and perhaps in particular, the heresies of Sabbatai Sevi and Jacob Frank—have served to, as it were, recalibrate Jewish law, forcing the community as a whole to read the laws as if for the first time and, in that way, scrambling the ossifications and certainties that have evolved over many centuries of scholarship and practice. For anarchism too, the law is never a thing to be completely abandoned but rather, as Walter Benjamin says, something which “exists not as a standard of judgment, but as a guideline of action for the agent or community who have to confront it in solitude and, in terrible cases, take on the responsibility of disregarding it.”² In this way, law becomes something other than an absolute determination. It becomes an object of critique and even resistance. And here, we can begin to see a link or at least a subcurrent within the Jewish tradition that connects it to anarchism.

As I will argue further, the purpose of false messiahs is to ensure that Judaism does not ossify into an absolutist doctrine. In our current moment, I see Judaism as being in deep crisis. The state of Israel and the Zionist movement in general have always been part of what I would call archism, a form of power that began approximately five hundred years ago that is based on false projections of truth that are received as absolute and irrevocable. Archism is so ubiquitous today that it does not usually have, or seek, a name. It has many varieties, liberal, fascist, authoritarian, but all of its variants are devoted to hierarchies that are produced and enforced through its fundamental devotion to an idea of truth based on entirely false principles. Diasporic Jewry was relatively immune to this phenomenon since it

¹ In this paper, I will be referring to anarchism throughout. In other work, insofar as anarchism as a term conveys a focus on European and North American thought and society, I have come to prefer the term “non-archism” to encompass many forms of resistance to archist power (the doctrine that has dominated the world for the past 500 years and takes various forms such as liberalism, authoritarianism and fascism) that extend beyond the west. Insofar as this paper remains within the west however, focusing on Jewish law and political theology, I retain the term anarchism throughout.

² Benjamin, *Toward Critique of Violence*, p. 58.

constituted a nation in name only and the nation state is one of the great vehicles that promotes and maintains archism to this day. The history of Zionism and the creation of the modern state of Israel and, in particular, the current day genocide in Gaza have produced a form of archism that has divided world Jewry. Given this ever-worsening impasse, and the violence and degradation that it has inflicted on Palestinian people, I would argue that it might take another false messiah to unmake the false sense of destiny and right that lies at the core of Zionist archism, a sense that has led to the current lethal moment. Here, one falsity could unmake another; the anarchist element in Judaism and the recalibrations in law and certainty that it produces are required to undermine and subvert the deep ossification that has constituted the historical and current experience of Zionism.

Nothing but false messiahs

In the passage cited above, Benjamin was commenting specifically on the Biblical commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill." This commandment seems about as straightforward as can be. And yet, for Benjamin, it is not clear at all. He tells us that the true meaning of this commandment can, in fact, never be known absolutely. Instead, it must be, as he says, confronted and sometimes even ignored (the German term he uses is *abszehen*, which literally means to turn your back on something).

Benjamin's cosmology makes the concept of an actual, liberating messiah as foretold in the many prophetic traditions of Judaism an impossibility. For Benjamin, since the Fall of Adam and Eve, the world has been marked by the absence of truth. Whereas in the garden of Eden, Adam was tasked with offering a name to the creatures and animals who inhabited the garden, once in exile, there was never again going to be such a direct relationship between language and its referent. We could say that the relationship in Eden was one of presentation, which is always true, while in exile, the human race is henceforth condemned to representation, which is always false.

As Benjamin puts it in "*On Language as Such and On the Language of Man*," after the Fall, the world "fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as mean, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle."³ Henceforth he tells us that there is nothing but the "uncreated imitation of the creative word."⁴ In such a condition, there is no recourse to truth and hence, all attempts at conveying truth are, in effect exercises in falsity.

Given this situation, for Benjamin, it is critical to acknowledge the human incapacity for truth. Otherwise, all speech is simply a matter of idolatry. There are no truth tellers in his view, only those who are honest about the fact that they are lying. In my own terms, I would put this as the difference between anarchism and archism, the latter being the practice of idolatrous representation that dominates the world.

In terms of his reading of messianism itself his "*Theological-Political Fragment*," Benjamin writes that

³ Benjamin, *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man*, p. 72.

⁴ Benjamin, *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man*, p. 72.

Only the messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates his relation to the messianic. For this reason, nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal but the terminus [*Ende*]. Therefore, the [order of the profane] cannot be built on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning. [...] The [order of the profane] should be erected on the idea of happiness.⁵

Here, we can see that, for Benjamin, the idea of a theological messiah manifesting in real history is not possible. Any such messiah will, by definition, be false. Yet, that does not preclude the importance of the concept of the messiah. In his own readings of Benjamin, Sami Khatib writes that

It is only the messiah himself who creates the relation between the messianic and the historical. And yet it is not the case that this relation will only come into being once the messiah has come, since the infinite approach of the messianic kingdom does not stand in any temporal relation to historical events. It is rather the case that the relation between the historical and the messianic exists only in the absence of the messiah, who as the sole groundless ground of this relation can complete and terminate it. The redeeming messiah's *absence* from historical events thus coincides with a *presence*, however weak, of a paradoxical relation or reference between the historical and the messianic.⁶

Dueling Nihilisms: Benjamin and Scholem

The question here becomes what is produced by a messiah who never actually shows up, or perhaps more specifically for the purposes of this essay, a messiah who shows up but who is a liar, and is (therefore) not a messiah at all? Here, I want to shed a bit more light on Benjamin's idea of a false messiah by contrasting his view to that of Gershom Scholem, one of Benjamin's closest friends. Scholem was from an early age interested in Jewish mysticism, in the Kabbalah and also in the heresy of Sabbatai Sevi.⁷ In his own reading of Sevi, Scholem also focuses on a purely negative messiah but in a way that differs significantly and critically from Benjamin due to the nature and endurance of the negativity that is produced via episodes of false messianism.

In his monumental study of Sevi, Scholem writes:

Sabbatai's apostasy, though surrounded with a tragic halo by Sabbatian literature, was essentially destructive of all values. The Sabbatian redeemer who was prepared to surrender passively to the power of impurity and to sink into the abyss of the *qelippah* [literally shell or husk, false appearances that the messiah has to contend with or destroy] while continuing to cultivate his dream of accomplishing a messianic mission, actually opened the door to the most nihilistic transvaluation of religious values...The efforts of the believers to discover a positive and constructive meaning in what was an essentially negative and destructive act, constitutes their peculiar contribution to the history of religion in general and to the

⁵ Benjamin, *Theological-Political Fragment*, p. 305.

⁶ Khatib, *A Non-Nullified Nothingness*, p. 6.

⁷ Note that there are many ways to render Sabbatai Sevi's name into English. In quotes that I provide from other readers you will therefore see many other forms of spelling besides the one that I have adopted.

subsequent history of Judaism in particular. Their faith required of them a measure of tension and a struggle with paradox that went beyond anything demanded of the Christian believer.⁸

As we can see in this passage, for Scholem, the nihilism produced via Sevi's movement is not purely destructive. It is in fact what spurs on Judaism to renew itself, to rediscover its own agonic or dialectical element. For Scholem, Sabbateanism, going underground after Sevi's conversion to Islam, became a kind of purifying force in Judaism, leading to the Jewish enlightenment and Zionism, among other developments.

It was always Scholem's desire that Benjamin follow him in his enthusiasm over the results of this Jewish renewal, particularly in terms of Zionism but that was not to be. Benjamin grew increasingly interested in Marxism, particularly after he encountered Asja Lacis, a committed Communist whom he fell madly in love with. Whether it was due to this infatuation or whether it was inherent in his own thought process as it developed, Benjamin was to take a very different position than Scholem.

In his own evaluation of their respective views on this false messiah, Edward Rothstein makes an interesting connection between Benjamin and Scholem. He writes:

Scholem's *Sabbatai Zevi* (1957) may be considered a kind of counterpart to Benjamin's early book on the *Trauerspiel* [German mourning plays]. Both are studies of the Baroque period; both present not just historical analyses, but images of the premodern age as a fallen world—either in the betrayal of faith in Sabbatean messianism, or in the recurring disasters on the stage of the *Trauerspiel*. In both, modern history itself, instead of being grounded in tradition and faith, is marked by excess, and by the arbitrary and the shocking.⁹

Yet, for all of this similarity Rothstein denotes a critical difference between these two thinkers as well. He argues that "Scholem, for all his studies of mysticism, was much more of a practical materialist when it came to the forces of history; Benjamin, for all his supposed materialism, was much more the mystic."¹⁰ Although Rothstein means this as a criticism (he is as opposed to Benjamin's Marxism as was Scholem himself) I see this insight as suggesting something utterly different, namely that Benjamin's nihilism—if that is what we should call it—is of a different order than Scholem's. Scholem was invested in positive and effective movements within Judaism, with Zionism being one of the key outcomes stemming from Sabbatian nihilism.

Benjamin, on the other hand, offers us a more truly negative nihilism, one that does not resolve itself but remains active and permanently disabling of any claims to speak for the truth.

For this reason, I would say that Benjamin's version of nihilism is anarchist while Scholem's version is archist, that is, based on claims that ultimately have no ontological basis, but whose entirely arbitrary roots are obscured via a connection to various transcendental claims.

Another way to say this is to argue that Scholem's false messiahs are not false enough. They contain a grain of truthmaking so that the "negative" is more like a temporary unraveling that serves to ultimately sustain a particular set of values. In Scholem's view, the results from Sabbateanism can be said to be valid because

⁸ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, p. 740.

⁹ Rothstein, *A Fateful Intellectual Friendship*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Rothstein, *A Fateful Intellectual Friendship*, p. 3.

they have been sustained via an exercise in negation that winds up affirming rather than undermining their validity. In my reading, this is not that different in many ways from Descartes' own formal nihilism wherein he too questions everything and then reasserts the value of Western thought via the exercise of negation itself.

“Strange moves,” Benjamin and Satan

If we accept Rothstein's insight that Scholem's text on Sabbatai Sevi and Benjamin's text on German Baroque *trauerspiel* [i.e. mourning plays] are roughly equivalent texts, we can use those two texts to begin to see a bit more clearly how Benjamin's version of false messianism defers from Scholem's. Benjamin's text *Origin of German Tragic Drama* never refers to Sabbateanism even though he studies roughly the same period of 17th century Europe. Yet, this text engages in a similar set of moves to those of Sabbatai Sevi himself especially in terms of figures and ideas that are normally considered to be anathema to orthodox Judaism.

This gets to the question of antinomianism and its relationship to false messianism. In his study of Sabbatai Sevi, Scholem speaks of what were called “strange deeds,” (*ma'asim zarim*) that is, acts done either by Sevi himself or his disciples that directly contravened Jewish law.¹¹ As Scholem writes:

According to the new, Sabbatian version, it is not enough to extract the sparks of holiness from the realm of impurity. In order to accomplish its mission, the power of holiness—as incarnate in the messiah—has to descend into impurity, and good has to assume the form of evil. This mission is fraught with danger, as it appears to strengthen the power of evil before its final defeat. During Sabbatai's lifetime the doctrinal position was that by entering the realm of the *qelippah*, good had become evil in appearance only. But there were more radical possibilities waiting to be explored: only the complete transformation of good into evil would exhaust the full potential of the latter and thereby explode it, as it were, from within. This dialectical liquidation of evil requires not only the disguise of good in the form of evil but total identification with it. It was along such lines that the subsequent theology of the Sabbatian radicals developed.¹²

There are many different interpretations of these acts, including the idea that to prove that they recognized Sevi as the messiah, his followers had to deliberately break Jewish law, something which is now revealed to always have been a kind of stopgap before his arrival. For Scholem in particular, it is important to keep Sevi's apostasy within the context of Judaism and Jewish law despite his conversion to Islam. In the passage above, as in many other places, Scholem turns to kabbalistic explanations for why, in doing what appeared to be wrong or even evil, Sevi was actually doing good.

Although Benjamin once again does not address Sabbateanism directly, in *Origin of German Tragic Drama* he does engage with what is ostensibly evil, focusing in particular on the figure of Satan. For Benjamin, the figure of Satan is very much caught up with allegory, a trope that epitomizes the kind of negativity referred to above. Allegory is a trope that cannot be resolved into a clear truth. It is ambivalent and openly representational and, in this way, resists even the idolatry that it otherwise portrays.

¹¹ Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy*, p. xiii. The term comes from Nathan of Gaza, Sevi's main prophet.

¹² Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, p. 742.

Allegory, in Benjamin's telling, was particularly prominent during the baroque period because, as authority based on Christian doctrine began to give way to a more modern sovereignty-based model, the opening that occurred in the interstices between changing forms of rule offered a radical space within which everything was in question and nothing was ever resolved. Benjamin writes of this period that:

The allegorical outlook has its origin in the conflict between the guilt-laden physis, held up as an example by Christianity and a purer *natura deorum* [nature of the gods], embodied in the pantheon. With the revival of paganism in the Renaissance, and Christianity in the Counter-Reformation, allegory, the form of their conflict, also had to be renewed. The importance for this for the *Trauerspiel* [German mourning plays] is that, in the figure of Satan, the middle ages had bound the material and the demonic inextricably together.¹³

This notion that the material and the demonic are bound together is reminiscent of the kabbalistic notion, already noted in Scholem's analysis of the *qelippa*, the husks and shards of a false world that are demonic but which the messiah must nevertheless contend with in order to recover shards of truth that lie amidst them. However, whereas Scholem sees this move as a way to separate the good from the demonic, for Benjamin Satan is a permanently ambivalent figure. He further writes:

Satan tempts. He initiates men in knowledge, which forms the basis for culpable behavior. If the lesson of Socrates, that knowledge of good makes for good actions, may be wrong, this is far more true of knowledge about evil. And it is not as an inner light, a *lumen naturale*, that this knowledge shines forth in the night of mournfulness, but a subterranean phosphorescence glimmers from the depths of the earth. It kindles the rebellious, penetrating gaze of Satan in the contemplative man. This confirms once again the significance of baroque polymathy for the *Trauerspiel*. For something can take on an allegorical form only for the man who has knowledge...The intention which underlies allegory is so opposed to that which is concerned with the discovery of truth that it reveals more clearly than anyone else the identity of the pure curiosity which is aimed at mere knowledge with the proud isolation of man.¹⁴

Here, we can see that rather than being a transitory figure, one who is ultimately overcome through the act of engagement, as is the case with Scholem, for Benjamin, Satan is a critical source of allegory itself, defying the build-up of any kinds of truths in the world. A simpler way to say this is that, in a world of lies and delusions, a figure like Satan, who is nothing if not a liar, is critical. The association between Satan and allegory and hence all forms of knowledge is required because Satan's very evil now becomes a way to warn off people from grasping too firmly at the concept of anything being true. If Satan is the basis of all knowledge, then knowledge should be itself always held in question. Rather than turning Satan into a figure of good, in other words, Benjamin engages with Satan to ensure that the dialectical relationship between truth and representation can never be fully resolved. Satan in this sense becomes himself a figure of false messianism, perhaps one that can be said to stand in between moments of the irruption of a figure like

¹³ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 226.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 229.

Sevi so that the possibility of resistance, of allegory, are always available even in the in-between times.

Here, once again, Benjamin is shown to have a purer form of nihilism than Scholem. He is not engaged with Satan merely as a device to get to the truth. Rather, he is engaged with Satan as a necessarily permanent figure who continues to scramble and call into question the possibility of truth precisely because at the basis of all human knowledge lies Satan himself. For Benjamin this is a "good thing" in that otherwise we'd have no way to engage in allegory, no way to check or overcome the false assertions of what I have been calling archism and Benjamin himself calls "mythic violence."¹⁵

Interpretations of Sabbateanism and its aftermath

To get a bit more into the more perfectly negative aspects of Benjamin's own sense of nihilism—and hence connecting his views to the doctrines and outcomes of Sabbateanism, it is helpful to get a bit into the weeds of the various interpretations of that movement and its effects in the world. A great source for these differences is Paweł Maciejko's *Sabbatian Heresy*. Maciejko provides both a commentary on and sourcebook for the various interpretations of Sabbateanism. For Maciejko there are several key thinkers who come out of the events of Sabbatai's false messianism (it is worth noting that Maciejko himself dislikes the term false messiah). The key figures to be interpreted here begin with Sevi's contemporaries. There is of course Sabbatai Sevi himself, Nathan of Gaza, who was his main proponent and self-declared prophet and Avraham Miguel Cardozo, another important follower of Sevi. In terms of those figures who in the contemporary period looked back on Sevi, there is Scholem himself as well as Yehudah Liebes. And, of course, there is Maciejko himself.

In order to show the way that Sevi's actions lent themselves to multiple interpretations, some of which perpetuated the kind of archist positivism that we see in Scholem himself and some of which does the opposite, let me focus on one key issue involving the very end of Sevi's career as a false messiah, namely his conversion to Islam.

Sevi's conversion was an act that rocked the Jewish world and led the vast majority to abandon Sabbateanism. Among his contemporaries, Nathan of Gaza was particularly insistent that this conversion was not a genuine renunciation of Judaism in favor of Islam but rather the culmination of a radical process within Judaism itself, one that was anticipated by prophecy and by the Zohar. For Nathan of Gaza, Sevi's conversion to Islam was the culmination of a long process of engaging in progressively worse forms of sin (from his perspective) in order to finally overcome sin completely. In this way, rather than Sevi being receptive to Islam, for Nathan of Gaza, it was the opposite, drawing Sevi himself into Nathan's own Islamophobia. In his view, it was the negative aspects of Islam that got Sevi to convert in order to get to the depth of what must be overcome. Nathan of Gaza writes:

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, p. 57.

And while I was still in Gaza, at the height of the reports [of Sevi's apostasy] and of the faith, I said to a number of people, know that because of the strangeness of the deeds of the King messiah those who believe will retract and only a select few will remain. [As Maimonides wrote in his "Epistle to Yemen,"] we will not know the matters relating to the King messiah until he comes...For we do not understand the words of our Sages [about this]. Nevertheless, anyone who wishes to investigate [the matter] thoroughly will find great assistance and support for the substance of his words in the words of our Sages of Blessed Memory, and especially in the words of the Zohar. And since the Talmud does not state explicitly that he will be opposed, we ought to follow the book of Zohar and decide [the matter] according to its words, as the later authorities have explicitly stated.¹⁶

Scholem reinforces this basis for the idea that Sevi's conversion did not constitute a true rupture with Judaism but in some sense its fulfilment. In particular, for Scholem, what was critical was the way that Sevi's demand for an absolute faith in him no matter what he did was itself the basis for that faith taking on a kind of life of its own for the entire Jewish collectivity. Thus, he writes that:

The emphasis on pure faith in the messiah as a supreme religious value, in spite of temptations and trials, produced an emotional identification with the new, messianic "reality." This emotional identification enabled many believers to persevere even in the face of hard facts. The readiness to enter the messianic kingdom transformed itself into the entry into the kingdom itself. Even before Sabbatai's apostasy the kabbalists' "world of tiqqun" had become an emotional reality which nothing in the realm of "outward" events could shake. The believers knew that the world of political and historical reality would soon perish as Sabbatai set out on his marvelous journey to take the crown from the sultan's head. By the time that the discrepancy between the two worlds had become painfully apparent, and Sabbatai's apostasy had shattered the naïve simplicity of the messianic faith, a new historical consciousness had already established itself which could absorb the shocks of external reality.¹⁷

Here, Scholem is reflecting one of Nathan of Gaza's own statements that faith in Sevi must be accompanied by no miracles or signs whatsoever. Any requirement of proof would be tantamount to undermining the absolute authority of Sevi and his relationship to God. In this way, this faith transcended anything that Sevi actually did wherein his conversion to Islam is only the final trial of this faith. It is this faith and spirit for Scholem which transcends the acts of Sevi as such and becomes the basis for a new and reinvigorated Jewish spirit.

However, for all of these kinds of claims that Sevi's act of conversion was aimed not beyond but within Judaism as such, Sabbatai Sevi himself says nothing of the kind. In his own letter explaining his conversion to Islam, he wrote:

My brothers, my children, and my friends know this: I understood with great clarity that the True One, whom I alone have known for many generations and for whom I have strived so much, wants me to enter the religion of the Ishmaelites, the Law of Islam with all my heart. To permit what it permits and to forbid what it forbids and to abolish the Torah of Moses till the time of the End. For the honor of His divinity and His revelation demand that I bring therein all whose souls agree with mine; after [the conversion] I will reveal to them the [mystery of] His divinity.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nathan of Gaza, *A Letter on Conversion*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, p. 663.

¹⁸ Tsevi, *A Letter on Conversion*, p. 34.

Finally, Liebes, a modern reader of Sevi, renders the conversion itself a true mystery. He writes that in a letter written to his brothers to explain his conversion Sevi offered his own explanation for why he had converted. He writes:

Sabbetai Zevi suggested grounds for God's wish, though his reasons are far removed from the renowned Sabbatean explanations for the apostasy, which are based on the Kabbala of Nathan of Gaza and develop Lurianic mechanistic theories. Sabbetai Zevi himself did not even hint at the need to descend into the *kelippot* to liberate the fallen sparks. It was Nathan of Gaza who offered this explanation of Sabbetai Zevi's apostasy and not Sabbatai Zevi himself. According to Sabbetai Zevi, the Messiah's apostasy was a form of punishment to Israel for having failed to recognize the true God—Sabbetai Zevi's personal God.²²

We see in all of these explanations a kind of spectrum that ranges from those (i.e. Nathan of Gaza and Scholem) who attempt to fold Sabbateanism back into Judaism to those who break entirely with Judaism as it is practiced (Sevi himself, Maciejko) and those who are somewhat in between (Cardozo and Liebes). One end of the spectrum—the archist end, I would argue—serves to contain and domesticate the antinomianism that Sevi represents. In doing so, a negative becomes, as previously argued, a positive, a basis for a rejuvenated and more certain form of Judaism.

When you reject that position as the other thinkers listed above have done to various degrees, you come to a very different kind of viewpoint. The very impossibility of continuing to be a Jew, or obeying the law of the Torah, when the messiah has converted to Islam—a drama that would be repeated when Sevi's main acolyte, Jacob Frank, who was born fifty years after Sevi's death, would himself convert to Catholicism—makes it impossible to understand Jewish law in the same way. The idea that Maciejko puts forth that God may have “converted” to Islam even prior to Sevi himself suggests a kind of aporia in the question of law so that the ability for human beings to explain or fathom it becomes nearly impossible.

Furthermore, one can see in Liebes' position perhaps especially, a sense of God's mystery and an ever more powerful mysticism that defies any attempt to crystallize it into dogma or truth. For Liebes, the key to Sabbateanism was the personal relationship between Sevi and his God and it is that relationship, not law or truth that is primary, undermining and subverting any attempts to turn Sabbateanism into an orthodoxy of any kind. Here, Rothstein's notion that Benjamin may have been more of a mystic than Scholem may in fact be correct but in a very different way than Rothstein may have intended. Here, mysticism does not mean a kind of woo woo belief in magic but rather a refusal for reality to coalesce into absolute truths that authorize behaviors that have, in a sense, the authority of God behind them.

Conclusion: the need for a new (false) messiah

All of this amounts to saying that, depending on how you read the life and doctrine of Sabbatai Sevi and, especially his conversion to Islam near the end of his life, you can either contain or free up the radical undermining of certainty that I think

²² Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 111.

is both his legacy as well as the legacy of other false messiahs. This is not a purely destructive power, but it is a purely negative one. In the same way that anarchism is not the chaotic mess that liberals and authoritarians think that it is, but is a form of organization that is deeply powerful when it is put into practice, here too we see not chaos and disorder for the sake of disorder but rather a very different sort of order that is produced precisely by the undermining and subversion of long held orthodoxies and certainties.

We see an anarchic tradition that runs throughout Jewish history and which was expressed both in the radical insurgencies delivered by Sevi and Frank as well as in the blossoming of radical Jewish political thought in the early twentieth century with the likes of Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig as well as in a lot of Jewish voices against the genocide in Gaza in our own time. In the case of Sevi in particular, his gift was to take the position of the messiah, the veritable "messiah king" as many of his commentators called him and use that position to undermine rather than bolster the authority that came with it. In this way, from the very heart of the authority system that underlies Judaic law, the pinnacle of that system turns, as it were, against itself in order to render itself free from its own certainties and otherwise oppressive powers. It is only from such a privileged perch that one can really do damage to the ossifications of law that come over the course of long repeated practices so that ideas become certainties that people are willing to kill or die for.

While this may not have been as much of a problem in the past, with the rise of archism and its expressions of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, imperialism and, in particular, capitalism, with its concomitant expressions of slavery and genocide among other great crimes, this issue becomes far more pointed. The rise of Zionism in the 19th century was a Jewish response to the rise of nation states and other archist formations among other communities of the west. Zionism is thus one among many expressions of archist certainty and, as such, it required a sovereign territory to control and a border to police, resulting in the ongoing histories of displacement, occupation and now genocide.

In terms of the next false messiah, one that might displace and undermine this false certainty in the right of the state of Israel to destroy another people, as Benjamin tells us, each generation is provided with what he calls a "weak messianic power."²³ This is a power that is inherent in every community and is always available to both resist and overcome instantiations of mythic violence. For Benjamin this "weak" power is actually undefeatable if and when it becomes manifest instead of just being latent. On the other hand, archism itself possesses another—and disempowering—kind of weakness in that it is always vulnerable to exposure, to the fact that it is based on nothing but lies and intimidation and ultimately violence. That violence is being expressed in Gaza today as it is in many other parts of the world as well. The fact that any people feel authorized to treat another people in such a way is a kind of ultimate example of where archism leads. The Jewish tradition, like so many other traditions, has within it a remedy for this violence and certainty. It lies in its own anarchist traditions and in the fact that it is being continually delivered (at least potentially) from its own dead-ends through the ongoing practice of false messianism.

²³ Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, p. 390.

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