

**Sabbatian influences on the Chassidic and Mitnagdic movements:
An excursion into messianic Kabbalah and its disseminators in
the aftermath of Shabbatai Tzvi**

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

BY

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**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY DEGREE**

IN THE DEPARTMENT OF OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR, D.J. HUMAN

AUGUST 2024

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Tanya:

Your love, support, intelligence and guidance, are more profound than anything I have ever known. You had to listen to every new idea, thought and approach I had while working on this dissertation. Besides, without your help, I would still be trying to register at university and I wouldn't yet have a student card, never mind knowing the code to the computer. And all the work I deleted by mistake would have been lost forever.

In gratitude

I sincerely thank my supervisor Professor Dirk Human:

Your unique synthesis of profound professionalism and scholarship, combined with empathy, open-mindedness and warm-heartedness will always be an inspiration to me. I have seen the respect you command from important international scholars, and at the same time, I have noticed how respectfully you interact with those who sweep the floors of your department. I am honoured to be your student and richer for the crossing of our paths.

In appreciation

I am deeply indebted to Professor J. F. (Hans) Janse van Rensburg:

You opened the doors of the academic world for me. You are an exemplar of brilliance, scholarship, kindness and humility. You understood when, initially, I ran away in fear; and supported me later, when I was ready to enter. Throughout, you have remained my dear friend and caring mentor.

This investigation gives voice to some of the following social and theological tensions as expressed by rabbis and chroniclers in response to the seventeenth-century Sabbatian movement – arguably, the most influential messianic movement in Jewish history:

- “I could not speak for my followers were few...and even they did not speak aloud but in secret” - R. Yakov Sasportas (1610-1698), a staunch opponent of Sabbatianism.
- “*We have a kabbalah [tradition] that we don’t talk about Shabbatai Tzvi*” (Falaji 2011:7) – R. Chaim Falaji (1788-1868), judge and Chief Rabbi of Smyrna (Izmir) and author of over eighty books.
- “*When the sages of Israel heard of the matter, they turned a blind eye as if they knew nothing of the matter*” (Chagiz 1714:37) – R. Moshe Chagiz (1671-c.1750) on the appointment of suspected Sabbatian R. Shlomo Ayllon to the prestigious Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam.
- “*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...I had known about these matters since my youth, but I had kept the words guarded in my heart*” (Carlebach 1990:78) – R. Netanel haLevi of Pesaro.

- “*Sabbatai Tzvi - cursed be his name – led astray a number of the greatest man of the generation and outstanding scholars . . . they left the fold and spoke evil regarding the Oral Law...but when a Tzadik [righteous man] sweetens their words, he transforms their sayings back into Torah*” (*Likutei Moharan* vol. I, Lesson 207:2, 1985:112b) – R. Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810).
- “[T]he Besht¹ said that Shabbatai Tsevi had a spark of holiness in him, but that Satan caught him in his snare” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86-7) – R. Yoel the Magid of Nemirov.
- “[There exists]² a mass of evidence on the development of Sabbatianism between 1700 and 1760” (Scholem 1941a:316) – Gershom Scholem on the spread of Sabbatianism well into the period of the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760).
- “[T]he majority of the rabbis of the generation became deaf and dumb, out of fear of the [Sabbatian]³ enemy that fell upon them when they saw the strong arm which was on his side” – R. Yakov Emden (1697-1776), the great Sabbatian expositor, referencing the Emden-Eibeschutz controversy.⁴

¹ ‘Besht’ is an acronym for **Baal Shem Tov**.

² Square brackets are mine.

³ Square brackets are mine.

⁴ Yakov Emden, *Igeret Purim*, 1715. MS Mich. 618 (Neubauer no. 2109), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Translated by Shalom Berger and Avi Staiman of the Academic Language Experts team (Maciejko 2017:128).

- “[R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk (1680-1756) also known as the *Penei Yehoshua*, the Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt]⁵ stated that *Rabbi Jonathan [Eibeschuetz] would not be the first great rabbi to make ‘that mistake’ of believing in Sabbatai Tsevi*” (Maciejko n.d.:11).
- “*I could go on telling about my own difficulties in trying to penetrate into this vanished world...[because]⁶ most, if not all, the theological documents which could throw some light upon it have undoubtedly been destroyed...everything was done to minimize its importance. It became obligatory to depict it as an affair of a very small minority and to pretend that there had been from the start a sharp division between orthodox believers and the heretics*” (Scholem 1941a:300).
- “No chapter in the history of the Jewish people during the last several hundred years has been as shrouded in mystery as that of the Sabbatian movement” (Scholem 1971b:n.p.).
- “*But...it is well known what happened in this regard in the time of the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi...and we still have not escaped him and his legacy*” (R. Menashe ben R. Yosef of Ilya, *Alfei Menashe*, part 2, 1822: 51–52) – R. Menashe of Ilya, a student of the Vilna Gaon, on the apparent interest in *Sabbatianism* expressed by some of the other students of the Vilna Gaon.

⁵ Square brackets are mine.

⁶ Square brackets are mine.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In clarification of the thesis title, a brief definition of the three movements identified therein will follow: '*Sabbatianism*' refers to the seventeenth-century mystical and messianic mass movement that coalesced around the messianic claimant, Shabbatai Tzvi (1626-1676) originating in the Ottoman Empire and soon spreading throughout Europe, North Africa and Asia. '*Chassidism*' refers to the mystical movement that developed around R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (c.1700-1760) during the second quarter of the eighteenth century in Podolia, Volhynia, and eastern Galicia (historical regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth corresponding to modern Western Ukraine). '*Minagdisim*' refers to a mid-eighteenth-century Lithuanian movement that rose in opposition to the *Chassidic* movement under the leadership of R. Eliyahu ben Solomon Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797).

This study is a chronological continuation of my Masters dissertation⁷ which examined the relationship between Jewish mysticism and messianism from 500 BCE up to and including the seventeenth-century messianic claimant, or false Messiah,⁸ Shabbatai Tzvi (1626⁹-1676). There I argued that throughout history, all new forms of Jewish mysticism usually resulted in new forms of messianism.

To avoid replicating previous research, the reader is urged to refer to that study for some of the background to the events, concepts and ideologies that this investigation is built upon, particularly those relating to Shabbatai Tzvi and his followers who were known as *Sabbatians*. Whilst continuing along the timeline after Shabbatai Tzvi, this investigation, however, focuses on the question of whether or not

⁷ Michal, G., 2022a, 'Jewish messianism culminating in the rise and dissemination of Sabbatianism - an excursion into messianic *Kabbalah* and its theological enterprises,' Thesis, University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology and Religion.

⁸ See "*False Messiah*" in Terminologies for my contextual preference for using the expression '*false Messiah*' over '*failed Messiah*' or '*messianic claimant*.'

⁹ Scholem (1941a:289) puts Shabbatai Tzvi's birth date at 1625.

there were significant *Sabbatian* influences on the later *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements.¹⁰

I had only come across *Sabbatianism* incidentally in my previous studies. It was something I thought was exactly that: incidental, insignificant and inconsequential. Shabbatai Tzvi, I thought, was an ignored footnote to Jewish history, a short flicker of a delusional flame that was soon extinguished, and he obviously had no foundational basis in any previous authentic mystical tradition – and certainly had no influence on any subsequent movements. I was not alone because Shaul Magid confirmed that:

“[i]t is safe to say that most college courses on modern Jewish thought, history, or culture do not begin with the mystical messiah Sabbatai Zvi. And it is even safer to say that most courses on modern religion in Europe do not include Sabbatai Zvi and the movement that arose in his wake” (Magid 2018:463).

Further inquiry, however, revealed that the roots of *Sabbatian* mystical thought – at least according to Gershom Scholem (1941a:285)¹¹ – lay deeply ensconced within sixteenth-century mainstream *Lurianic Kabbalah*,¹² and traceable *Sabbatian* influences extended well into the eighteenth-century in subsequent Jewish (and other) movements. It can be argued that *Sabbatianism* must have been one of the most powerful forces in Jewish history. I intend that this investigation will shed some more light on the extent of that influence.

Immanuel Etkes (1996:447) makes the valid observation that all too often, not only in the religious world but even in academia, students and scholars are bound by tradition:

“a tradition which guided our first steps as independent scholars and in which we continue to follow, whether consciously or not.”

¹⁰ For the sake of clarity, however, parts of this Introduction overlap the Introduction to my Masters study.

¹¹ Not all scholars agree with Scholem on the pivotal role *Lurianic Kabbalah* played in formulating *Sabbatian Kabbalah*. Other dissenting views are addressed in Michal (2022a:103-139) and my tendency to support Scholem, albeit with some modification, is explained there in section 5.9, 127-136.

¹² The *Kabbalah* or mystical and theurgical school of R. Yitzchak Luria (1534-1572), also known as the Ari or Ari Zal. This school was active in Safed, northern Israel.

While this phenomenon is natural, it presents a hidden danger that we lose our ability to think critically. I had been in the *Chassidic* world for some decades and only recently ventured into academia but am well aware of these inherent ‘traditions’ from both sides. Being drawn by an innate perception that some spill-over from *Sabbatianism* to *Chassidism* must have occurred – although significant aspects of both religious and academic literature often present the movements as very distinct and separate from each other – I intend to explore this matter without being bound to either of these ‘traditions.’

My previous study (Michal 2022a:104) showed how, initially, probably the majority of the Jewish population was swept up in the tide of *Sabbatianism*. They called themselves *Maaminim* (*Believers*) and they drew from all segments of the Jewish population, including the rabbinic and influential upper classes. The minority opposition to *Sabbatianism* was persecuted and referred to as *Kofrim* (*Deniers*) (Maciejko (2017:xiii). This picture was later distorted by a revisionist history which censored evidence of the success and popularity of the *Sabbatian* movement (Scholem 1973:5). The *Sabbatian* movement had become an embarrassment to the Jewish community and attempts were made to destroy some of the historical communal records, “on the order of the rabbis” (Scholem 1987:266). I demonstrate, however, that the *Sabbatian* movement, while officially over, was anything but. The movement was simply driven further underground¹³ where its literature and its rabbinic personalities continued to flourish and exert significant influence. In a sense, this study attempts to reconstruct the records that had been destroyed; and to create a new record of subversive *Sabbatian* activity that continued well into the next century.

From as early as 1670, official rabbinic bans of excommunication were issued against the *Sabbatians*. The movement was formally outlawed. A year later the authoritative rabbinic and communal Jewish body entitled the *Vaad Arba Aratzot*, or *Council of Four Lands* announced:

“a great herem [excommunication] with sounding of the ram’s horn...[is issued against] the criminals and reckless people belonging

¹³ The term ‘*underground*’ is used here, not with any tendentious intent, but simply to reflect the reality of the *Sabbatian* movement having officially been banned and excommunicated by the mainstream rabbinate following Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy to Islam in 1666. The only way the movement could survive into the future was through secretive and clandestine means, by going ‘*underground*.’

to the sect of Sabbatai Tsevi...[on pain of]¹⁴ infamy, fines, jail, and even to deliver them to the justice of the Gentiles” (cited in Maciejko 2011:36).¹⁵

The bans were to be read out aloud in all synagogues and required the *Sabbatians* to be expelled from “every community and every province.”

The emergence of a new form of *Sabbatianism*, promoted now by crypto-*Sabbatians* created a tension within Jewish society that can only be described as ‘the elephant in the room.’ This tension was compounded by the inherent nature of *Sabbatianism* which wasn’t a political or social movement – rather, it was a *mystical* ‘outreach’ movement (Michal 2022a:99) and a fervent one at that. *Sabbatians* were not passive and quiet followers happy to keep to themselves. Instead, they developed a sophisticated programme of outreach activity through which they successfully managed to attract new adherents, and the movement expanded. The methodology was to appear to be part of the mainstream and then to slowly introduce their theology to the unsuspecting recruits. The followers then felt part of an inner circle privileged to know the ‘secrets of redemption’ before they were ‘revealed’ to the rest of the world. The adherents were determined to clandestinely spread the *Sabbatian* message and teachings. According to Goldish (2020:113-114):

“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... [however, s]cholars of Sabbateanism have long known that this is a misleading picture.”

Large numbers of secret *Sabbatians* permeated not just the general population but, pointedly, even the rabbinic world:

“A significant number of Jews, especially [rabbinic]¹⁶ scholars, remained fully committed to Sabbatai and Sabbatean theology

¹⁴ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁵ I thank Professor Maciejko for directing me to this important source emphasising the official nature of the bans against *Sabbatianism*. My study highlights the fact that despite these official excommunications and bans against *Sabbatianism*, counterintuitively, the movement peaked and its influence became even more acute.

¹⁶ Square brackets are mine.

through both the apostasy and the expiration of their messiah”
(Goldish 2020:114).

This study will attempt to show that this well-structured allegiance to *Sabbatianism* continued to be a major influencing factor even as the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements were emerging.

All potential *Sabbatian* influences had fertile ground to spread because there was great difficulty in differentiating a *Sabbatian Kabbalist (mystic)*,¹⁷ from a mainstream *Kabbalist*. Before the seventeenth century, Jewish mysticism was largely elitist (Elior 2012:94-95) and the proclivity of only a few *Kabbalists*. Shabbatai Tzvi, through his use (and revision) of classical Jewish mysticism, had arguably created the largest Jewish mystical and popular messianic¹⁸ movement in history:

“It was the most widespread and influential Jewish messianic movement since Christianity” (Goldish 2018b:419).

Although it failed to yield the awaited Jewish Messiah when Shabbatai Tzvi converted to Islam on September 15, 1666 (Scholem 1987:265), the masses had had a taste of mysticism and they wanted more. Although they were disappointed and demoralised, they clung to the belief that something of an eschatological nature was still in the air. The extent of the mass crisis of faith that ensued after Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy was perhaps as significant as the extent of his movement’s initial success. I contend that this precariousness and vulnerability left the masses potentially open for the next major movement which very soon appeared on the Jewish horizon, namely, *Chassidism*.

A disconnect within the same religious society situated within similar geographical parameters and being pulled by two opposing mystical and theological gravities – combined with an element of secrecy and denial – does not allow for a stable transmission of any doctrine. This post-Shabbatai Tzvi *destabilisation period* corresponded precisely to the *incubation period* when *Chassidism* and its opposing *Mitnagdism*, were being formed. All this was taking place within the very same social

¹⁷ In this study the terms *Kabbalist* and *mystic* are used interchangeably.

¹⁸ The overarching theme of my Master’s Thesis was how mysticism is always a precursor to messianism and that “*intense mysticism (of any genre) usually precedes some eschatological event*” (Michal 2022a:139).

setting. Through examining the *personalities* that made up the rabbinic leadership, as well their concomitant *literature* that was prevalent during that intermediate period between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, I attempt to demonstrate that there must have been a significant influence from the former upon the latter.

A word of caution is in order, though, concerning the use of the term ‘influence,’ particularly in the context of earlier Jewish history. In recent years, scholars of Jewish theology have been reluctant to use the word ‘influence’ because history is a complicated *process* and not a simple series of static or binary *events* that allow one occurrence or doctrine to simply influence another (Satlow 2008:38). Some scholars prefer to minimise their use of the term ‘influence’ and contrast it “*with a more dynamic model of interaction*” (Schäfer 2002:218). This is because, principally in classical rabbinic thought, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct “*the precise historical context in which rabbinic theology was produced*” (Weiss 2015:373).

These are important observations. However, concerning more recent history – and I refer to the period around the beginning of the eighteenth century (where both the character of rabbinic *literature* and the *personalities* associated therewith, are better documented and preserved despite revisionist attempts to hide the more blatant *Sabbatian* references) – I think it is appropriate and even necessary to apply the term ‘influence’ while remaining vigilant not to oversimplify the concept. Indeed, I have incorporated the term “*influences*” into the very title of this study because the evidence of such influences is so acute, and often openly so, that is reasonably possible to reconstruct the historical and theological context.

It can be well argued that the cataclysmic advent of the false Messiah Shabbatai Tzvi is one of the most significant events in the early modern period¹⁹ of Jewish history (Barnai 2014: 94-570). It is because of this significance, coupled with the irony that it is largely ignored, that I chose this theme as my area of investigation.

Drawing from Yehuda Liebes (2007:1-91), I expand even further upon the apparent sphere of *Sabbatian* influence, to include Lithuania. Lithuania was the hotbed of the *Mitnagdim* (*opponents* of the *Chassidic* movement) whose sober antagonism

¹⁹ The early *modern period* is usually defined as spanning from c. 1500 to around c. 1800. Online source: "The Early Modern Period." Encyclopedia of European Social History. *Encyclopedia.com*. 12 Jan. 2021 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>. Retrieved on 27 January 2021.

toward the *Chassidic* movement under their leader the Vilna Gaon,²⁰ was always taken as a theological and historical ‘given’ across the board. The *Mitnagdim* openly accused the *Chassidim* of being too closely connected to the *Sabbatian* movement, and worse. Yet Liebes’ research shows that aspects of *Sabbatianism* even penetrated within the tight *Mitnagdic* circles of Lithuania as well, effecting the Vilna Gaon’s close student, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov amongst others. This changes the historical landscape because the *Mitnagdim* were, until now, generally considered uniquely free of the taint of *Sabbatianism*.

It must be clear that this study of *Sabbatian* influences, as well as my previous study on mysticism and messianism, are the results of investigations only into the Jewish *mystical* worldview which had its origins in various forms of *Kabbalah*. A *rationalist* approach as adopted by Maimonidean and other rabbinic schools of Jewish rationalism could never result in these manifestations of mystical messianism.²¹ Instead, the rationalist rabbis conceive of gradual development and incremental perfection of the world as part of an evolution towards a natural ‘messianism’ without resorting to any form of supernaturalism (Michal 2022a:144).²²

The theme of this study is perhaps most concisely portrayed in my 2022 Three Minute Thesis (3MT) presentation which had to convey the essence of my research of some years, to a non-technical audience, in under three minutes:

Shabbatai Tzvi and his influence on the Chassidic movement

“I’m going to ask you to do something you’ve never done before: Imagine you’re a group of *Chassidic* rabbis, with long beards and flowing robes. You are familiar with a mystical tradition you believe to be as old as the universe itself. Your movement is authoritative and respected, with millions of fervent followers.

²⁰ R. Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman is known as the Vilna Gaon, or ‘Genius of Vilna’ (1720-1797).

²¹ For more on the distinction between the Jewish mystical and rationalist approaches, see: Slifkin, N., 2021, *Rationalism vs. Mysticism; Schisms in Traditional Judaism*, The Torah and Nature Foundation and Gefen Books, Jerusalem.

²² For a contemporary secular presentation of a similar notion of the gradual and positive progression of humankind, see: Rosling, H., 2018, *Factfulness*, Hodder & Stoughton, London.

Then someone suggests that some of your theology may be rooted in an earlier, less-than-glorious mystical movement that flourished just before yours began.

And this earlier movement was so dramatic that it captured the minds of the vast majority of the Jewish population of the seventeenth century. It was endorsed by most of its rabbis and even produced its own Messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi.

When he turned out to be a false Messiah, there was a religious crisis, but it was too late because he had already created the largest messianic movement in Jewish history. It was just too powerful to suddenly disappear, so it was forced to go underground together with its mystical teachings which were officially outlawed and regarded as taboo.

Against this background, another mystical movement was soon to emerge – the *Chassidic* movement. My research looks at the influence the earlier messianic movement had on the later mystical *Chassidic* movement. By the way, this is like saying that an American President was trained in the Kremlin.

So, what does one do with all this information? And remember it's not just about one group or one religion because contentions roots of all ideologies plague all theologies.

And people think theology is boring.

I am a rabbi but I am also a helicopter pilot and I've jumped from aeroplanes, yet I don't think I've ever been so captivated as when I engage in critical theology. That does not mean that one criticises theology; it means one analyses theological thought and its development critically, allowing for a more academic orthodoxy.

If you study at an academic institution and if you prove Einstein wrong, you'll get a Nobel Prize. If you study at a religious seminary and prove someone wrong, you get excommunicated.

I don't plan for either event – but the findings of my research compel me toward an in-between-space where one must explore for things one dare not discover, even at the expense of uncovering an intricate tangle of theological root systems.

Religion looks at trees – Theology looks at roots.”²³

1.2 Motivation and relevance

I am drawn to this period of Jewish history on so many different levels. Firstly, in my view, Jewish religious or theological history is not just history, as interesting as that history may be. Jewish theological history²⁴ forms the kernels of the *Hashkafa* or *theological worldview* in which Jews live and operate today. *Sabbatianism*, for example, went on to influence future Jewish ideologies in various ways. Without knowledge of the *genesis* of current dominant theologies (which we sometimes take for granted as if they were always there without having undergone a process of development or evolution), we can never fully understand the essence of these dominant theologies. Seen this way, *theological history* is not just history, it becomes the very *essence* and *core* of the *theology* itself. Understanding where an ideology may have come from must inform our understanding of the *relevance* of the ideology itself, as opposed to a mere blind acceptance of that ideology. I argue, therefore, that this study is relevant for those concerned with the broader question of evaluating various theologies and orthodoxies – which, while worthy in their own rights and as popular as they may be – may contain some degree of ‘unorthodox’ origins.

Secondly, leaving technical theology aside for a moment – even (perhaps especially) in religion, facts matter. From the official mainstream rabbinic perspective, Shabbatai Tzvi was declared a false Messiah after his apostasy to Islam in 1666. But very few realise just how large and successful his movement once was, and more significantly, how its undercurrents continued to spread and flow within Jewish

²³ Presented at the University of Pretoria, Postgraduate Research Day, Department of Research and Innovation, 19 August 2022.

²⁴ By “*theological history*,” I mean the historical origins, roots, sources and causes of the resultant theology – not the history depicted in, nor recorded by, the theology. By “*theology*,” I mean any religious or traditional Jewish text or work, as opposed to an academic or other perception or representation thereof.

religious society well after his passing, despite all the official bans and renunciations. *Sabbatianism*, in some form, reached into almost every Jewish enclave, effecting generations and creating its own culture:

“Sabbatianism is the matrix of every significant movement to have emerged in the 18th and 19th century, from Hasidism to Reform Judaism, to the earliest Masonic circles and revolutionary idealism” (Carlebach 1990:15).

In this study, I show just how influential the *Sabbatian* movement *continued to be* in the all-important era when everyone thought it was all over. I argue that the post-Shabbatai Tzvi era, predominantly, became the crucible from which emerged much of modern Judaism as we know it today.

It is a sensitive and complicated matter because at one stage, “*almost all*” of the respected rabbis gave their approbation to the Shabbatai Tzvi. The upper secular class supported it as well (Zeitlin 1979:100). Eventually, they were all disappointed and the rabbis, particularly, had to carefully retract their earlier positions. Yet many rabbis remained ambivalent to the essential principles of the movement which continued to allure the rabbinic leadership, as well as the followers, well after the death of Shabbatai Tzvi (Kahana 2012:589-616). There were secret *Sabbatian* networks within the underground world of *Sabbatian* rabbis in important communal and leadership positions, and this indicates how the movement continued to exert a significant influence on the mainstream:

“Seventy-five years after the death of Sabbatai Zevi in 1676 in remote Albania, Sabbateanism remained an issue of major public concern for Jewish society...But no less disturbing was the percolation of Sabbatean ideas into mainstream writings” (Kahana 2012:589).

And most tellingly:

“[T]here was no sharp differentiation between a *magid* or kabbalistic preacher, on the one hand, and a hidden Sabbatean heretic, on the other” (Kahana 2012:595).

This means that long after Shabbatai Tzvi’s death, there were still no clear boundaries that existed between *Sabbatians* and Jewish mystics or *Kabbalists*. *Sabbatianism* was an extremely powerful ideological force that pervaded society and must have

influenced much of post-Shabbatai Tzvi Judaism. It was in this murky environment, dominated by a network of *Sabbatian* rabbinic *personalities* and a new *genre* of rabbinic *literature*, that *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism* began to develop. For these reasons, I am motivated to try to understand the context and *Sitz im Leben* in which these orthodoxies, emerging from the early to mid-eighteenth century, found themselves.

On a personal but important note: Constant nuances intentionally run like a thread throughout this investigation and should not be lost in the seemingly tedious details of the history and dialectics of the theology. I intentionally mention many names of rabbis – not to be pedantic, but to emphasise where in the spectrum these important leaders were positioning themselves. I write this discourse as a practising Orthodox rabbi, with *yeshiva* training on three continents in both the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* camps, humbly aware of, and fascinated by, the tensions and currents of classical and contemporary Jewish thought.

The Hebrew word for an ideology or religious movement is ‘*zerem*,’ which literally means a ‘*current*’ or a ‘*flow*.’ My research into the *Sabbatian* movement has shown me that while times and terminologies may have changed, the fundamental stream, momentum, and magnetism of mass messianism in its various secular and religious manifestations have not changed. I started out thinking that *Sabbatianism* was just a fascinating relic of the past. I was intrigued by how the majority of a population from all walks of life could get drawn into its vortex; and how an entire people could experience a mass form of cognitive dissonance, hanging onto and even developing further the notions of its Messiah after his apostasy and even after his death.

From my Master’s Thesis on messianism from 500 BCE to Shabbatai Tzvi (Michal 2022a), I learned that the same pattern and procedure has been repeated again and again on mass levels throughout Jewish history – yet each time the adherents believed they were on the cusp of a new messianic reality and were experiencing something that had never occurred before. Each time there was a sense of righteous indignation. Those who didn’t follow the crowd of the believing *Maaminim* (*Believers*) were ostracised, called heretics and discarded, often violently, by the group. The followers were the only people who were right and the rest of the entire world was wrong.

Yet those inside the movement did not believe they were exhibiting signs of cultic behaviour and they doubled down even as their prophecy failed (Festinger, Riecken and Schachter 1956:12). Once caught in the ideological flow of the ‘*zerem*,’ there was no escape from that riptide as it was nigh impossible to fight the current induced by the masses. This was a repeated pattern and a pattern that would still be repeated. Borrowing and reframing a phrase from Shaul Magid, “*Sabbateanism on the other side of modernity*” (Magid 2013:131) – even the shades of the different ‘isms’ can never hide or change their essential and original characteristics. Therefore, in a very deep sense, I write about what I witness today through the idiom of this research into the past.

1.3 Research problem

The separation in time between Shabbatai Tzvi and the *Chassidic* movement that arose in his wake was not very long at all. The founder of the *Chassidic* movement, R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, was born in 1698 or 1700, or according to Heschel (1974:3) as early as around 1690 – and Shabbatai Tzvi died in 1676, making them separated by either twenty-two, twenty-four, or only fourteen years. Many people who had seen Shabbatai Tzvi could have seen the Baal Shem Tov.

Respected rabbis and *Halachic* leaders who expounded on religious law, had at one stage endorsed Shabbatai Tzvi and many even adhered to his ideology after his death (Scholem 1987:265). Attempts were made, therefore, to reframe previous associations. This presents a major research problem because not only were *communal records* destroyed, but the *theological records* within the religious literature itself have also been severely tampered with.

Studemund-Halévy describes how Jews destroyed their own records of the ‘messianic’ events surrounding Shabbatai Tzvi:

“When Shabbetai Şevi converted to Islam on September 16, 1666, after his arrest and under threat of execution, and the news of that arrived in Amsterdam, at the latest in November, almost all testimonials of the messianic hope were destroyed in the Portuguese Jewish Communities, books were confiscated, extensive bodies of correspondence were burned, entries were deleted from the

Community books and registers or the corresponding pages were simply torn out” (Studemund-Halévy 2016:170).

This censorship of *Sabbatian* works and denial of *Sabbatian* association continued for a long time. A later example of this type of censoring can be found in the printed version of *Shivchei haBesht*²⁵ which is an internal *Chassidic* biography of the Baal Shem Tov. It records that the Baal Shem Tov said that Shabbatai Tzvi had a ניצוץ קדוש (*spark of holiness*) in him. That is already quite an admission for the leader of a new movement intent on entering the mainstream to make so soon after the Shabbatai Tzvi period.

However, according to the original hand-written manuscript, the claim was far more dramatic: Shabbatai Tzvi had a ניצוץ משיח (*spark of the Messiah*)! The printed version, in its attempt at toning down this overt messianic reference, provides no editorial notification of this fundamental discrepancy. The editors and printers were obviously very aware of the original manuscript version with its blatant messianic innuendo – but they did not indicate that they had changed the text to reflect a less provocative position. We would never have known of this extremely controversial messianic reference to Shabbatai Tzvi, in the name of the founder of the *Chassidic* movement, were we not able to compare it to the original version in the manuscript. The whereabouts of the original handwritten document, unfortunately, are not known and all we now have is just a facsimile copy (Liebes 2007:14, footnote 79).

Another example of some form of ‘messianic censorship’ can still be seen two generations later in the writings of the Baal Shem Tov’s great-grandson, R. Nachman, the founder of the popular *Breslov* (or *Bratzlav*)²⁶ *Chassidic* movement. According to Arthur Green:

“Any discussion of messianism as presented in the Bratslav [=Breslov] sources is greatly complicated by the fact that here, more than any other area, the hand of the inner censor has been particularly heavy...[T]he relationship of Nahman to the final redemption...[was] considered too controversial to be discussed outside the community

²⁵ *Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz (1994:86-7).

²⁶ The Podolian town was called ‘*Bratzlav*’ but the *Chassidim* from there romanticised it to ‘*Breslov*’ as the latter resembles the Hebrew phrase *lev basar* (a *heart of flesh*). The two names *Breslov* and *Bratzlav* are often used interchangeably.

or allowed to appear in print. Thus...one document written by Nahman purporting to deal with this matter, called *Megilat Setarim* by the later sources, has never been published, and exists to this day as a manuscript shared only within the most intimate circles of Bratslav *Hassidim*" (Green 1992:185).²⁷

Green (1992:20) also describes an oral *Breslover* tradition that an uncensored version of the popular biography of R. Nachman by his student, R. Natan Sternharz, entitled *Chayei Moharan*, is also apparently extant but has never been revealed or printed (see section 5.3).

These are just a few examples of the difficulty one is faced with, when researching this period because the overt and covert censoring of important sources is a significant factor. The common denominator that overwhelmingly concerns the various censors is *Chassidism*'s relationship with 'messianism' in the aftermath of perhaps the greatest messianic upheaval in Jewish history. Are the censors merely being cautious and protective or are they hiding something they do not wish to share?

Another problem we are faced with is that not all scholars agree with the hypothesis that the *Chassidic* movement was even influenced by the *Sabbatian* movement in the first place. There is much lively debate over this fundamental issue. Most scholars do not see *Chassidism* as directly influenced by *Sabbatianism*. Rachel Elijor (2012:85) ascribes the Khmelnytsky massacres beginning in 1648 as a major cause of both *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* (although *Sabbatianism* preceded *Chassidism* chronologically). Joseph Citron (n.d.:32-33), Jacob Barnai (1995:175) and Moshe Rosman (1982:6) follow a similar position emphasising the role the massacres played. Israel Halpern (1969a:55-60) maintains that rabbinic and communal neglect, and non-representation of the masses, were primary causes of the rise of *Chassidism*. Gershom Scholem views the *Chassidic* movement as a 'neutralisation' of *Sabbatianism* and *messianism*, suggesting that *Chassidism* was not essentially even a messianic movement. Immanuel Etkes (1996:453) also sees *Chassidism* as toning down the 'urgent' messianic theurgy of *Lurianic Kabbalah* that may have influenced *Sabbatianism* in the first place (although the role *Lurianic Kabbalah* played in early *Sabbatianism* is also debated). Rachel Elijor (2012:94) suggests that *Chassidism* had

²⁷ Square brackets are mine.

a novel and original form of mysticism to offer and did not need to rely on *Sabbatian* mysticism. Mendel Piekartz claims that *Chassidism* was never even intended to be a mass movement. The historian Simon Dubnow sees *Chassidism* as arising from dissatisfaction with the traditional conservatism of the rabbinate. Raphael Mahler (1985:3-67) basing himself on Karl Marx's notion of 'historical materialism,' where historical change is affected by class and economic conditions, sees *Chassidism* as rising out of the economic and political suffering of the Jewish people. Jacob Katz (1993:195-201), however, corrodes the causal connection between the historical crises and the rise of *Chassidism*. He suggests that traditional Jewish communities had survived many crises before. Immanuel Etkes concurs with Katz. He adds that contrary to commonly held perceptions, the early *Chassidic* movement did not draw from the ignorant and downtrodden masses but instead from the "*scholarly intelligentsia*."

On the other hand, two students of Scholem, Isaiah Tishby (1964:204- 226) and Joseph Weiss (1957:199-213 and 1951:46-105) do indeed see some *Sabbatian* links to *Chassidism*. So does Yehuda Liebes. I build on these 'unpopular' views in support of the notion that *Sabbatianism* influenced *Chassidism*. I develop an approach using rabbinic *literature* and the *personalities* associated with the production thereof, particularly in the period between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, to demonstrate how popular and widespread *Sabbatian* rabbinic leaders and their writings were, how frequently their works were published, and how receptive the readership was to *Sabbatian* ideology – although this was often veiled since the *Sabbatian* movement had officially been banned and its followers excommunicated since 1670. Still, I show how the *Sabbatian* movement, and its literature, continued to grow and even peak around the period the *Chassidic* movement was emerging.

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern is another lone voice in this area of research. He acknowledges a "*highly complex, murky, and **underresearched**²⁸ interaction between...sabbateans and Hasidim,*" and does not believe it was simply a "*dispute between theologians*." He observes that other scholars have concentrated on:

"what Hasidim could have thought rather than who Hasidim were or could have been. This focus on the intellectual content of hasidic

²⁸ Emphasis is mine.

ideology prevents the...testing [of] new and risky but rewarding approaches to Hasidism” (Petrovsky-Shtern 2008:146).²⁹

With this study’s *literature and personalities approach*, I go against the grain of much previous scholarship as I look for “new and risky” pragmatic, cultural, historic, as well as rabbinic and theological roots of commonality between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* (and its concomitant opposition *Mitnagdic* movement that rose in the immediate wake of *Chassidism*).

The research problem is further compounded by the scholarly debate, as mentioned, over whether the early *Chassidic* movement was even concerned with messianism in general (let alone *Sabbatianism*). Ben Zion Dinur (1955:170) and Isaiah Tishby³⁰ (1967:1) maintain that *Chassidism* was indeed founded on the very idea of messianism and that it was essentially a messianic movement. With time, however, the focus shifted away from cosmic messianism and withdrew more inwardly to concentrate on individual redemption (*Deveikut*). Gershom Scholem (1941a:329) and his student Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer (1968:168), however, promote the idea of the *Chassidic* movement more as “neutralising” extreme messianism. Even Dinur, with the most extreme of all these views, agrees that by the end of the period of the Baal Shem Tov, messianism had become a less pervasive element in *Chassidic* thought. Schatz Uffenheimer shows how in the writings of the *Magid of Mezeritch* (Międzyrzec Podlaski) – the successor to the Baal Shem Tov – the turn from messianism to inward *Deveikut* (clinging to God or *unio mystica*) is quite dominant. Green (1992:185), however, shows that one exception to that inward trend is R. Nachman of Breslov whose messianism is very much pronounced.

Relating to the above discussion about the *Chassidic* movement moving away from overt messianism, I explore the efficacy of the argument that the reason why the reins of the *Chassidic* movement were not passed down to the Baal Shem Tov’s own son, Tzvi Hirsh, but instead to the *Magid of Mezeritch*, was because of the alleged *Sabbatian* leanings of the Baal Shem Tov’s own son (Liebes 2007:15) (see section 4.7.6). This may be why the *Magid of Mezeritch* was so keen to move away from any

²⁹ Square brackets are mine.

³⁰ Moshe Idel describes Isaiah Tishby as “the most important of Scholem’s students” (1998b:43).

forms of overt messianism and why he changed the direction of the movement more inwards to *Deveikut* and personal redemption.

Complicating the research problem yet further is the matter of coding. As the study unfolds, it will become evident that the crypto-*Sabbatians* frequently relied on a form of coding through oblique but pregnant references and *gematriot* (numerology – the Hebrew alphabet carries numerical values for each of its characters). These *gematriot* sometimes corresponded to the *gematriot* of Shabbatai Tzvi and other key leaders in the movement, as well as to known *Kabbalistic* and *Sabbatian* references and concepts. The *gematriot* are often alluded to by *gershaim* (*inverted comas*) and appear innocuous to the untrained eye (Liebes 2007:24).

Another challenge that any researcher faces is the blurring of boundaries between the various dominant religious factions active during this period. The *Sabbatian* and *Frankist* movements experienced a progressing ascension which, counterintuitively, peaked as late as the concluding part of the eighteenth century (Elior 1995:242). And it was difficult to even speak of a ‘*Chassidic*’ movement per se because there were now *four* significant sects which all referred to themselves as ‘*Chassidim*’ operating within the same geographical space and time frame. These were the *Sabbatians*, *Frankists*, the followers of R. Natan Adler of Frankfurt (1741-1800), and the followers of the Baal Shem Tov.³¹ Often the mainstream rabbinic authorities simply regarded all these four groups as similarly antinomian, without any allowance for possible counter-claims to earlier ‘legitimate’ mystical traditions, especially on the part of the Adler and Baal Shem Tov *Chassidim* (Elior 1995:236).

The research problem cannot ignore the very real and inevitable controversial character of a study like this. Liebes (2011:6, 2014:7) notes how he has been personally challenged by some scholars and even ridiculed by the ultra-orthodox world for expressing his findings – many of which I use in this study. Nevertheless, he stands firm in the integrity of his research, maintaining not only that it is accurate, but also a legitimate contribution to both Torah and academic scholarship (Liebes 2014:5). In 2019 a critical edition of R. Natan of Gaza’s major work, *Sefer haBeria*, was published.

³¹ The *Sabbatians* and *Frankists* had some affinity, although the latter is generally regarded as a more radical offshoot of the former. The *Chassidim* of R. Natan Adler and the *Chassidim* of the Baal Shem Tov, however, were not related, although some literature sources of the latter, favourably reference the former (Elior 1995:241). Notwithstanding the added complication of four different groups calling themselves *Chassidim*, throughout this study, the term ‘*Chassidim*’ generally refers to the *Chassidim* of the Baal Shem Tov.

This caused an uproar in the ultra-orthodox community resulting in the publisher receiving death threats.

R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook would tell his students in the *Mercaz haRav Yeshiva*, that his father, R. Avraham Yitzchak haCohen Kook (1865-1935) was adamant that his specific teachings about a Jew's innate connection to Judaism even if they were not remotely observant, came from the Vilna Gaon and not, as most assumed, from *Chassidism*. The son, R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, was challenged and faced huge opposition every time he mentioned this because it flew in the face of common perceptions of his illustrious father (Liebes 2003:25). Much of this research also challenges common perceptions.

The *Chassidic* movement today may have its opponents but nothing like the opposition it experienced in its early years. The movement has changed over time and wedged itself inextricably within the fabric of contemporary Judaism, to the extent that it has almost come to represent religious Judaism. But this was not always the case. A very clear distinction must be drawn between modern *Chassidism* and classical *Chassidism*. Even the early generations of *Chassidim* bemoaned the differences between them and the founding generation. There were many internal revolutions within the movement. Perhaps most notable was the rebellion of R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1789-1859) who challenged the authority of the Baal Shem Tov (Heschel 1974:4-10). Green reflects this view:

“Hassidism...had grown soft and overly accepting of its own inner abuses. The popularization of the movement had cost it its intensity”
(Green 1992:105).

This study is concerned with the powerful dynamics and influences that shaped the movement in the first place and is *not* an excurses into contemporary *Chassidism*. (This study does touch upon an aspect of contemporary *Chassidim* and the framing of its earlier history in section 5.2 where the *Kherson Geniza* is examined, but there the concern is the historical reliability of internal *Chassidic* traditions). I do *not* maintain and neither does the research indicate that the *Chassidic* movement was an extension of *Sabbatianism* per se. Of course, roots will always remain roots no matter how the tree grows, but the purpose of this study is to explore the incubation period of two new mystical movements, *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism*, birthed in the throes of an extremely intense and mystical *Sabbatian* epoch. (Surprisingly, *Mitnagdism* was also

a mystical movement, see section 6.4, although it arose subsequent – and in opposition – to *Chassidism*).

Finally, in terms of access to research – to the best of my knowledge – I have exhausted the main available sources in the English language, and have extended the enquiry to less-known Hebrew academic articles and primary sources in both Hebrew and Yiddish. Many of these are produced here for the first time in English.

1.4 Aims and objectives

The five main aims of this investigation are:

- Firstly (as per chapter 2), to discuss the development and spread of post-apostasy *Sabbatianism* and to give an overview of the almost simultaneous rise of the *Chassidic* movement; to discuss the scholarly debate over whether or not *Chassidism* was influenced by the *Sabbatian* movement; and to present my ‘*literature and personalities approach*’ which examines important *rabbinic writings* and *texts*, together with their associated *authors* and influential *personalities* – often with *Sabbatian affiliations* – as an underlying methodology for this enquiry.
- Secondly (as per chapter 3), to identify influential *Sabbatians* in leadership positions, suspected *Sabbatians*, and *Sabbatian* exposes or whistle-blowers who were active during the period between Shabbatai Tzvi and the Baal Shem Tov and beyond; and to demonstrate their intricate networks and ideologies showing that there was a potential for further *Sabbatian* influences to perpetuate even well into the eighteenth century.
- Thirdly (as per chapter 4), to analyse *Sabbatian* and allied mystical literature that was being published and distributed during that period, and to examine in-depth and detail several specific works that may link *Sabbatianism* to the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements.
- Fourthly (as per chapter 5), to examine some internal *Chassidic* accounts of its (pre)history, and to discuss R. Nachman of Breslov’s attempt to ‘fix’ *Sabbatianism*.
- Finally (as per chapter 6), to determine whether there is sufficient evidence and a strong enough argument to show possible *Sabbatian* influences on the

Mitnagdic movement and to quantify the extent and significance of that proposed link.

The objectives of this study are:

I. To present an introduction, discuss motivation and relevance, define the research problem, outline the aims and objectives, define the research methodology, advance a hypothesis, present a chapter division, describe the orthography, and provide a list of abbreviations:

- The Introduction explains that the reason why I became interested in the seemingly obscure topic of *Sabbatianism* is that in actual historical and theological terms, it was never at all obscure or insignificant. For this reason, I set about investigating to what extent *Sabbatianism* was indeed quintessential in formulating certain foundational theological layers upon which aspects of later Judaism were soon to be established.
- The research problem deals with the difficulty of researching *Sabbatianism* because of later attempts at revising its history and the efforts of active internal and external systems of censorship. This, coupled with the lack of scholarly consensus regarding whether *Sabbatianism* can be considered a strong enough influence on *Chassidism*, as well the debate as to whether *Chassidism* was even concerned with messianism at the time of its inception. Then, let alone *Chassidism*, there is the largely unexplored phenomenon of *Sabbatianism* influencing parts of the *Mitnagdic* camp which was, until recently, considered free of its taint. All this is further challenged by the *Sabbatian* coding methodology which is difficult to decipher. Finally, a study of this nature runs the risk of being considered inherently controversial (even if not intended) by its investigation of possible *Sabbatian* influence on movements that are today regarded as so integral to Judaism.

II. To present a background to the *Chassidic* movement showing how it emerged during a period when there was a spread and saturation of *Sabbatian* teachings, even (if not predominantly) after the apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi; and to examine the scholarly debate over the causes, influences and intentions of *Chassidism*.

- To examine the development and character of post-apostasy *Sabbatian* mysticism and to show how it penetrated well into the *Chassidic* century.
- To examine the emergence of the *Chassidic* movement including a glimpse into the world of *Baalei Shem*.
- To present my *literature and personalities* approach by highlighting how certain *personalities* used their particular *literature* to act as carriers of *Sabbatian* ideology.

III. To present an overview of a society saturated with secret *Sabbatian* personalities.

- To examine the *Sabbatian* circles of R. Avraham Rovigo, R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter, R. Chaim Malach, R. Yehuda Chasid, R. Yehuda Leib Prossnitz.
- To examine the *Sabbatian* tensions between R. Shlomo Ayllon and R. Moshe Chagiz.
- To examine the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy and debacle surrounding R. Wolf Eibeschuetz.
- To examine the anti-*Sabbatianism* of R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi and his son R. Yakov Emden.
- To examine the debate over the *Sabbatian* leanings of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto.
- To examine R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen and mainstream rabbinic forays into *Sabbatianism*.
- To examine authoritative Approbations in influential books attesting to the authenticity of *Sabbatian* literature.

IV To demonstrate how the proliferation of mystical and ethical texts may have been used as carriers of *Sabbatian* ideology:

- To examine mystical and ethical Yiddish texts.
- To examine the works *Derech haYashar le Olam haBa* and *Kitzur Shelah* by R. Yechiel Michal Epstein.
- To examine *Kav haYashar* by R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover.
- To examine *Nachalat Tzvi* by R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch.

- To examine the anonymous work of *Chemdat Yamim*.
- To examine *Sefer haTzoref* by R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref.

V To investigate some internal accounts of *Chassidic* history and examine R. Nachman of Breslov's attempt to 'fix' *Sabbatianism*:

- To examine the authenticity of the letters in the Kherson Geniza and Shivchei haBesht that describe early *Chassidic* history.
- To examine R. Nachman of Breslov's relationship with and his possible attempt to 'fix' *Sabbatianism*.

VI To demonstrate apparent *Sabbatian* influences of the *Mitnagdic* movement:

- To examine the nineteenth-century *Mitnagdic* Aliya and to determine whether it involved a messianic or *Sabbatian* intent.
- To examine the writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and his student R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver for *Sabbatian* content and references.
- To examine the writings of the Vilna Gaon for allusions to *Sabbatianism*.

VII. To present a synthesis of the above study.

- To advance a proposal for further study.
- To describe the terminologies.
- To provide a complete bibliography, and a list of the rabbinic, biblical, *Talmudic* and *Zoharic* sources consulted in this study.

1.5 Research methodology

1.5.1 Descriptive

This is a literature study. The research methodology adopted is descriptive, evaluative, explanative and textual. By descriptive, I refer to a *historical* and *theological* study of the milieu extending from Shabbatai Tzvi (d. 1676), leading up to, surrounding, and

enduring after, the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) and culminating with the students of the Vilna Gaon around the mid-nineteenth century.

The term *historical* is used to describe a diachronic and historical-critical³² presentation of the timeline between Shabbatai Tzvi, the Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon. Relevant historical sources, texts and testimonies are investigated to position this research upon a solid factual foundation.

The term *theological* is used to describe the variety of religious ideologies and writings that emerged during the focal period of this study. These *theological* sources are analysed not just in a traditional or conceptualised manner, but academic research sources are also consulted in an attempt to gain a contextual and critical understanding of *Sabbatian*, *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* ideology and their place within the various mystical schemata of this important era.

1.5.2 Evaluative

The study will show where the aforementioned historical, theological, traditional and academic approaches overlap and where they are in conflict with each other. These approaches are then evaluated and analysed for their relevance regarding whether or not it is reasonable to conclude that *Sabbatianism* influenced *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdim*.

1.5.3 Explanative

Within the descriptive methodology as outlined above, an explanative approach is also adopted by showing how the empirical history may have *shaped*, and have *been shaped* by conceptualised mystical considerations and messianic pressures.

1.5.4 Textual

³² According to Law (2012:4), “*The terms ‘historical criticism’ and ‘historical-critical method’ refer to approaches which are concerned with the history of the Bible both with regard to the history of the text and the events which the text recounts.*” However, the expression ‘*historical-critical*’ is not used here as Law describes it as relating to biblical criticism, but rather as in a critical presentation of the historical events surrounding this investigation. In other words, my intention is not just to present the historical facts, but to critically examine, evaluate and interpret them as relating directly to the hypothesis of this study. Additionally, it must be noted that in this sense, the term ‘*critical*’ is not meant as in ‘*to criticise*,’ but rather to as to ‘*examine critically*.’

Various *Sabbatian*, *Kabbalistic*, *Ethical*, *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* texts are evaluated for evidence of possible *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements. These are all employed within a broad framework which I have termed a '*literature and personalities approach*,'³³ in keeping with the subtitle of this study: "an excursion into *messianic Kabbalah* and its *disseminators* in the aftermath of Shabbatai Tzvi." Some of the Hebrew texts, (including primary sources and academic research) appear here in English for the first time.

1.6 Hypothesis

This study hypothesises that as a result of a thorough analysis of the context and content of rabbinic texts, including the known associations of their authors – spanning the periods of Shabbatai Tzvi, the Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon – the conclusion can be reasonably drawn that the Chassidic and Mitnagdic movements had been fundamentally subjected to multiple Sabbatian influences and that a causal doctrinal and rabbinic link between Sabbatianism and both the Chassidic and Mitnagdic movements can be demonstrated.

1.7 Chapter division

Chapter 1 contains the introduction, motivation and relevance, the research problem, an outline of the aims and objectives, the research methodology, the hypothesis, the chapter division, the orthography, and a list of abbreviations.

Chapter 2 is an overview of the spread of post-apostasy *Sabbatianism* including an examination of its mystical content. It then turns to the eighteenth-century itinerant healers and wonderworkers, known as *Baalei Shem*, to provide the backdrop to the cultural milieu in which the Baal Shem Tov emerged. This is followed by a brief history of the *Chassidic* movement and a literature review on the extent of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement. I then present this study's *literature and*

³³ Rabbinic *personalities*, together with their ideologies, theological associations and particularly the *literature* they produced, are studied and evaluated. This literature and the *personalities* who produced it, are then examined for markers that may serve as indications of *Sabbatian* influence on *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism*. The term '*personalities*' is used here, not as in '*characteristics*' or '*qualities*,' but rather in the sense of '*well-known*,' '*interesting*' or '*famous personalities*.'

personalities approach which is adopted throughout this study to show how frequently important *rabbis* wrote influential *works* with *Sabbatian* content thereby creating some form of linkage between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*.

Chapter 3 traces the identities of influential *Sabbatians*, suspected *Sabbatians* in leadership positions, and *Sabbatian* exposers, all of whom were active particularly, but not exclusively, in the period between Shabbatai Tzvi and the Baal Shem Tov. These include R. Avraham Rovigo, R. Yeshaya Chasid, R. Avraham Cardozo, R. Nechemia Chayon, R. Mordechai Ashkenazi, R. Shlomo Ayylon, R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, R. Yeshayahu Bassan, R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale, R. Moshe Zacut, and R. Leibel Prossnitz. The chapter also deals with *Sabbatian* exposers like R. Yakov Sasportas, R. Moshe Chagiz, the Chacham Tzvi, and the fierce conflict – perhaps the most vociferous rabbinic conflict in Jewish history – that erupted between R. Yakov Emden and his interlocuter, Chief Rabbi R. Yehonatan Eibeschutz. It also examines whether R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was connected in any way to the *Sabbatian* movement.

Chapter 4 is a study of the proliferation of mystical texts in the period just prior to the advent of *Chassidism*, acting as possible carriers of *Sabbatian* ideology. These include the works *Kav haYashar* by R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, *Derech haYashar leOlam haBa*, by suspected *Sabbatian* R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, *Nachalat Tzvi*, an abridged version of the *Zohar* translated into Yiddish by R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch, the anonymous work *Chemdat Yamim* which may be the most controversial Jewish book ever published, and *Sefer haTzoref* by R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref whom some associate with the legendary figure of R. Adam Baal Shem.

Chapter 5 examines some internal *Chassidic* accounts of its own history including *Shivchei haBesht* and particularly the *Kherson Geniza* which is used as a test case for the historicity of internal *Chassidic* sources, and argues that it is a forgery intended to introduce a bias into *Chabad Chassidic* history. This chapter also examines R. Nachman of Breslov's apparent attempt to 'fix' *Sabbatianism*. The possible *historical revisionism* within the *Chabad Chassidic* tradition may have reflected a parallel process of *theological reinterpretation* within the *Breslover Chassidic* tradition.

Chapter 6 uncovers unexpected *Sabbatian* influences on what is usually considered to be the conservative *Mitnagdic* movement during the early nineteenth century. It

examines the writings of the students of the Vilna Gaon including R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and the latter's student, R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver and discusses some of the veiled ideology of the Vilna Gaon himself. It also touches upon the reason for the possible ambivalence of the Vilna Gaon when it came to intervening in the Emden-Eibeschutz controversy.

Chapter 7 is the synthesis and conclusion of this study where I show how the five primary aims have been achieved: 1) The presentation of an overview of the development, character and spread of post-apostasy *Sabbatian* mysticism as it began to merge with the stirrings of the *Chassidic* movement; 2) The identification of influential *Sabbatians* in leadership positions, suspected *Sabbatians*, and *Sabbatian* exposes who were active, particularly during the period between Shabbatai Tzvi and the Baal Shem Tov, but also beyond; and the demonstration that the intricate *Sabbatian* networks and ideologies created a potential for further *Sabbatian* influences to continue well into the eighteenth century; 3) The analysis of *Sabbatian* and allied mystical literature that was being published and distributed during that period; and the examination in depth and detail of a number of specific important works that may link *Sabbatianism* with the *Chassidic* movement; 4) The examination of some internal *Chassidic* accounts of its history including *Shivchei haBesht* and the *Kherson Geniza*; and to examine R. Nachman of Breslov's attempt to 'fix' *Sabbatianism*; 5) The examination of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Mitnagdic* movement as evident in the writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and other students of the Vilna Gaon.

1.8 Orthography

- To make for easier reading, I do not use a key for transliteration instead I spell all Hebrew words the way they sound and are generally pronounced in *Sefaradit* (modern Hebrew). Thus, *Halakha* is spelt *Halacha*, and *Zadik* is spelt *Tzadik*. I generally use *Yakov* for *Jacob* and *Moshe* for *Moses* — unless in a quote where the original spelling is always used.
- All Hebrew words are italicised.
- All theological concepts are capitalised and italicised, as in *Tikun*.

- Titles of Hebrew works, reference books, texts, and manuscripts are italicised. Biblical books (in English) are not abbreviated but written in full, like ‘Psalms’ instead of ‘Ps.’
- This study will make use of footnotes.
- Longer quotations are indented with inverted commas and are not italicised. Even words that are usually italicised in the text, are not italicised in quotations (as in cases where the translation is by this writer) unless they are italicised in the original cited texts. Shorter quotations are placed within the regular text but in double inverted commas and italicised.
- Words, sentences, or phrases omitted from quotations are indicated by three full stops without spaces between the last word, the full stops, and the next word.
- The chapter headings, headings, subheadings, and bibliography, start with upper-case letters.
- The method of reference that will be used in this study is the adapted Harvard reference system, also called the author-date reference system.
- In the text, only the author(s) and date of publication are provided in brackets, followed by the page reference (Shalom 1941:24). In the case of Ben-Amos and Mintz, however, I add (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86), to illustrate that the quotation is from the translation of *Shivchei haBesht* and not an independent work. If there is no pagination, this will be indicated by ‘n.p.’ where the page number usually occurs, as in (Kaplan 2017:n.p.). If there is no date, this will be indicated by ‘n.d.’ where the date usually occurs, as in (Liebes n.d.:14). If the source is a lecture or oral transmission, the name is provided in brackets followed by a dash, as in (Van Selms 1970-) and (Steinsaltz 2012-). With regard to rabbinic sources – because rabbis are often known by the titles of their books – those titles are included in the text references as in (Emden, *Torat haKenaot*, 1845:111).
- The list of references to books contains the full bibliographical particulars, under the title bibliography as follows:

Miron, D., 2010, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

- References to Journals are as follows:

Studemund-Halévy, M., 2016, 'What Happened in Izmir Was Soon the Talk of Hamburg, Shabbetai Şevi in Contemporary German Press Reports', *El Prezente Journal for Sephardic Studies*, vol. 10, 155-172.

- References to articles in books are as follows:

Scholem, G., 1979, 'Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea', in *Messianism in the Talmudic Era*, Edited by Leo Landman, Ktav Publishing House, New York, 51-74.

- Online references are as follows:

Online source: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/joseph-caro/>. Retrieved on 24 January 2021.

- References to an encyclopaedia entry are as follows:

Singer, I., and Wiernik, P., 1906, 'Perlhefter (Eybeschütz)', in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, Funk & Wagnalls, New York and London.

Online source: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14240-tannaim-and-amoraim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

- References to Hebrew academic articles are as follows:

Rabinowitsch, W.Z., 1941, 'Al "Sefer haTzoref" leR. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref [On "Sefer haTzoref" by R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref]' (Hebrew), *Zion*, vol. 1, Historical Society of Israel, 80-84.

- References to Rabbinic sources follow immediately after the general Bibliography and appear as follows:

Emden, Yakov, 1845, *Torat haKenaot*, Amsterdam.

- References to other sections or chapters within the text of this study are in brackets as follows:

... rather it was the Sabbatians who spread *Lurianic Kabbalah* (see section 5.7).

1.8.1 Abbreviations

BCE Before the Common Era

CE	Common Era
Cf.	Compare
Ed or Eds	Editor of Editors
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i>
MS	Manuscript
MSS	Manuscripts
n.d.	no date
n. p.	no pagination
R.	Rabbi
v.	verse
vv.	verses

Honorifics such as Doctor and Professor are mostly omitted in keeping with the academic style of writing and in no way is this an indication of disregard or disrespect. The designation 'R.', however, is intentionally used in this study to refer to a rabbi, emphasising that the individual is acting within the official capacity of the office of the rabbinate, and to stress that they were not part of a fringe group but very much representative of their communities. Traditionally, rabbis are referred to by their title and full names (like R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) and for this reason, full names of rabbis are generally used throughout this study.

CHAPTER 2

SPREAD OF SABBATIANISM AND RISE OF THE CHASSIDIC MOVEMENT

2.1 Introduction

In a previous study (Michal 2022a) I dealt with Jewish mysticism and messianism from 500 BCE up to and including the advent of the false Messiah Shabbatai Tzvi (1626-1676). Somewhat ironically, this present study shows that it was *after* Shabbatai Tzvi's apostasy to Islam in 1666, that there was an unanticipated expansion, if not an explosion, of mystical *Sabbatian* literature and activity that continued well into the *Chassidic* period. I will analyse the continued development of the *Sabbatian* mystical doctrine, as well as demonstrate the extent of the spread of the *Sabbatian* movement in the post-apostasy era – a time when *Sabbatianism* is considered by many to have already run its historical and theological course. The rise of the *Chassidic* movement on the heels of the *Sabbatian* movement must be seen against the backdrop of the development and diffusion of *Sabbatian* mysticism, if for no other reason than that of chronology. We begin this chapter with an overview of the development and character of post-apostasy *Sabbatian* mysticism and then discuss the rise of the *Chassidic* movement.

2.2 Development and character of post-apostasy *Sabbatian* mysticism

2.2.1 Introduction

In many aspects, the post-apostasy *Sabbatian* mystical doctrine departed quite radically from previous *Lurianic* and other earlier *Kabbalah*. Initially, there were two main contributors to this new mysticism, R. Natan of Gaza (1643-1680) and R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (c.1626-1706). A general doctrine of *Sabbatianism* already existed from the early days of the movement which helped propel it into one of the largest movements in Jewish history – but this doctrine was reworked, refined and expanded upon in the critical post-apostasy period. The immediate concern was how to deal with the challenges Shabbatai Tzvi's unexpected apostasy presented to 'orthodox' and 'traditional' messianism, and a large body of *Sabbatian* literature was

produced expounding on this matter. Later, this literature began to traverse general theology and ethics as well. The emerging *Sabbatian* theorists and *Kabbalists* were up to the task because they were evangelical, zealous and “*men of tireless literary and propagandistic activity*” (Scholem 1941a:310).

2.2.2 Doctrine of a “new Torah” and a “new cosmic order”

From a theological perspective, considering that the earlier *Sabbatian* messianic promises, expectations and stakes were so high and the movement so popular, Shabbatai Tzvi’s unanticipated apostasy had to be urgently and convincingly interpreted if the movement was to sustain itself. The architects of *Sabbatianism* rose to the occasion and used that unexpected accident of history to skilfully combine and transform latent and scattered kernels of earlier mysticism into a sophisticated new system of *Kabbalah* with an unprecedented character of its own.

However, Scholem points out that the apostasy, and subsequent adaptation of the *Sabbatian* doctrine to that event, was considered by many to be a critical theological line that had been crossed. From that point onwards, insofar as mainstream Jewish orthodoxy was concerned, the *Sabbatian* movement became officially classified as a “*mystical heresy*” (Scholem 1941a:306). The implication of this characterisation is significant to this study, because the instant at which the “*heresy*” begins, coincides precisely with the moment at which the intense post-apostasy ideology starts to develop and successfully disseminate. In other words, this burgeoning, innovative, charismatic and alluring mystical movement began to flourish at the same time it was officially branded as heretical and unorthodox.

Essentially, the *Sabbatian* ideologues promulgated the dramatic and mystical notions of the birth of a “*new cosmic era*” and the emergence of a “*new Torah*.” These stirrings of the *Sabbatian* spiritual revolution must not be underestimated because, in the new *Sabbatian* formulation, even the Torah must change. Traditional Judaism places a fundamental premium on adherence to both the Torah and rabbinic law. With *Sabbatianism*, however, for the first time:

“in the history of mediaeval Jewry...the undisputed dominance of the Mosaic and rabbinic Law gave way to a new mood” (Scholem 1941a:313).

The *Sabbatian* leadership legitimised the idea of an antinomian spiritual revolution based on their conceptualisation that the energy of the world had changed. It was a new cosmos which demanded new spiritual priorities. R. Natan of Gaza writes in his long letter to Raphael Joseph, which became a statement of *Sabbatian* doctrine (Scholem 1973:270):³⁴

שהכוונות שגילה הרב הגדול מוהרי"ל זצקו"ל אינם שייכים כלל בזמננו זה, בהיות
שהעולמות הם באופן אחר ודומה למי שעושה מעשה חול בשבת... מפני שהם
סתומת

"The [previous] Meditations [Lurianic Kavanot] that were revealed by the great rabbi...R. Yitzchak Luria...are not appropriate anymore in our times, since the worlds are [now] in a different order, and it would be like someone who does mundane activity on the Sabbath...because [R. Luria's ways] are [now] blocked" (R. Natan of Gaza in R. Yakov Sasportas, *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, 1954:9).³⁵

Until the seventeenth century, only select scholars and *Kabbalists* would have been aware of the notion of a hypothetical *Torah Chadasha* (*New Torah*) existing in purely theoretical realms and pertaining to a vague, mystical and utopian future. Now, during the *Sabbatian* period, this previously obscure concept was suddenly clear, relevant, and in the public domain. Other mystical ideas were also emerging into the open as the *Sabbatians* developed a sophisticated and elaborate overarching system of mysticism:

"Nathan's later writings reveal him as a formidable theoretician of Kabbalah, spinner of a vast and original theosophical web" (Halperin 2008:3).

The extreme mystical and *Kabbalistic* nature of the *Sabbatian* movement – incorporating both the pre and particularly post-apostasy periods – allowed for these perceptions of a new world order. According to sixteenth-century *Lurianic Kabbalah* (which Scholem considers to have been the theological predecessor of *Sabbatianism*), and specifically its notion of *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*), messianic redemption offered

³⁴ The letter is recorded by R. Yakov Sasportas and is taken from his *Sefer Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, edited by Isaiah Tishby (see section 2.2.3).

³⁵ Translation, square brackets, and punctuation are mine.

“*liberation from the yolk*” and “*new freedoms*” (Scholem 1941a:305). Messianism was no longer just redemption from political exile but rather a shift in the cosmic order. This was not understood as a nuanced or gradual shift but, in Scholem’s understanding, it was a complete and catastrophic shift in the cosmos. This *Lurianic* messianism was something the *Sabbatians* were later to develop more dramatically and tendentiously.

Moshe Idel (2011a:35) disagrees strongly with Scholem’s adherence to the idea of the catastrophic and cosmic shifts latent within *Lurianic Kabbalah* as a cause of *Sabbatian* ideology. Instead, Idel maintains that *Sabbatianism* was influenced by the earlier (pre-*Lurianic*) *Kabbalistic* notion of a quiet personal redemption, as well as influenced by the thirteenth-century astrological *Kabbalah*. These classical mystical ideas of quiet personal redemption and astrology, Idel insists, held more sway than the newer sixteenth-century ‘catastrophic’ *Lurianic Kabbalah* (Michal 2022a:110).

I am, however, more tempted to follow the view of Scholem – that *Sabbatian* messianism was firmly rooted in *Lurianic Kabbalah* more than in earlier classical *Kabbalah* (Michal 2022a:128). This is for the reason that, as I hypothesised and demonstrated in a previous study, “*mysticism always precedes messianism*” (Michal 2022a:16). And extreme mysticism begets extreme messianism. Both *Lurianic* and *Sabbatian Kabbalah* were among the latter category of intense if not theurgic mysticism and were chronologically closer together compared to the earlier forms of the *Kabbalah* of astrology and personal redemption.

Moshe Idel maintains that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was primarily concerned with the *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) of the heavenly realms, with “*the advent of the Messiah being only an indirect result*” (see section 2.2.5). Nevertheless, Idel brings what he calls an ‘extreme’ example of a *Lurianic Kabbalist* who had previously been a *Marrano*, R. Yakov Chaim Tzemach from the mid-sixteenth century. R. Tzemach connected the word *Mashiach* (*Messiah*) to another Hebrew word, *Moshech*, which means to ‘draw down.’³⁶ In this interpretation, the essential nature of messianism is the belief that the Messiah must be ‘drawn down’ by human agency, or theurgy, specifically through the study of *Kabbalah*, “*offering thereby a more talismanic vision of this lore*” (Idel 1998:179).

³⁶ It must be noted, however, that *Mashiach* is spelt with a מ while *Moshech* is spelt with a מ.

R. Tzemach bemoans the fact that not enough people in his generation concern themselves with such messianic theurgy and activity, and “*do not draw down and hasten the Messiah*.” He offers a simple socioeconomic reason for such neglect:

שביאת משיח תלויה בתשובה ובעסק הזוהר ובחכמת הקבלה ואין בניה עוסקים בה כי אם
א' מעיר ושנים ממשפחה כי אין מדרש קבוע כראוי בכל עיר ועיר כמו שיש בעסק
התלמוד...אין בניה מושכים וממהרים המשיח...אבל מפני שאין מי שישים על לבו לעשות
השתדלות והכנה שיהיו מדרשים העוסקים בחכמה זו וכל א' מבקש לחמו מן ההלכה מפני
ההספקה ורוב העוסקים בחכמה זו הם עניים ואין ידם משגת לעסוק בקבלה כי אין עשיר שם
על לב

“The advent of the Messiah is dependent upon repentance and the study of Zohar and the wisdom of Kabbalah. But her [Rachel’s³⁷=Jewish] children do not engage [in this esoteric study] except for one in a city or two in a family, because there are no formally established [mystical] study houses in the cities, as there are for [regular] Talmud study...Her children [=the Jewish people] do not draw down [Moshchim] and hasten the Messiah...But, because no one attempts [to rectify this oversight] by providing study houses prepared for this [mystical] study, and because everyone draws their sustenance from monies donated for the regular study of Halacha [and Talmud] – the majority of people who do study this [mystical] wisdom are the [unsubsidised] poor people who are unsupported in their study of Kabbalah because the wealthy do not consider it worthwhile [to fund the study of mysticism]” (*Kol beRama* in Scholem 1950:194).³⁸

Thus, according to R. Tzemach, the reason why the Messiah had not yet arrived was that there was no formal infrastructure with concomitant finances, to ensure the continued study of *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

While Idel emphasises that R. Tzemach’s view is an ‘extreme’ or atypical example of a *Lurianic Kabbalist*, I argue that *Lurianic Kabbalah*, in general, must still

³⁷ This is a reference to Rachel weeping for her children who are ‘gone’ (Jeremiah 31:15). In R. Tzemach’s interpretation, they are ‘gone’ because they do not study mysticism and, as a consequence, cause distress to their mother.

³⁸ This extract from a manuscript by R. Tzemach, entitled *Kol beRama* (British Museum Margaliot 795), was copied by Scholem. Translation, square brackets and punctuation are mine.

have been a significant influence on *Sabbatian Kabbalah* because *Sabbatian* redemption, as we have seen, required a radical paradigm shift involving conceptualisations of a new cosmic order. I do not believe that a clearer or more practical example of the implementation of this belief in a cosmic shift can be found outside of *Sabbatianism*, considering how successful and widespread the movement was. Exile did not befall the Jews because the physical edifice of the Temple was destroyed but rather because the spiritual and cosmic fibre of the Temple had been destroyed (Scholem 1941a:305). Redemption, therefore, required an equally radical change in those same cosmic structures. Both *Lurianic Kabbalah* and *Sabbatian Kabbalah* require a cosmic shift and advocate for theurgy to assist that shift.

Idel, on the other hand, is of the view that the majority of the people would not have even been aware of intricate theurgical details like *Tikun* and *Moshech* (*spiritual rectification* and ‘drawing down,’) and instead claims:

“The vast majority of the Jewish people were interested in being shown a way of life and detailed rituals and were not capable of delving into the intricacies of its basic principles” (Idel 1998:178).

While I could not agree more with Idel on this point, I have suggested elsewhere that because of ‘well-known principles’ like *Emunat Chachamim* (*Trust [or Faith] in the Rabbis*),³⁹ the Jewish religious population is fundamentally guided by their rabbinic leadership. *Emunat Chachamim* is taken extremely seriously in most religious Jewish communities to this day. One could even argue that conforming to rabbinic authority is a major factor in the social and theological structures of such communities, particularly in areas where belief and eschatology are concerned. Thus, while it is true – with Idel – that the masses are only “*interested in being shown a way of life*” and not interested in the origins of religious ideas, I contend that significant factions of the

³⁹ Although *Emunat Chachamin* is commonly regarded as a ‘well-known principle,’ technically, it is not found in the Babylonian Talmud. Its source, rather is in chapter six of *Mishna Avot* (6:6), where it appears in a list of forty-eight practices through which one can “acquire Torah.” This sixth chapter of *Mishna Avot*, however, is not part of the original canon of the *Mishna*. Besides, according to José Faur: “Originally it meant ‘the faith of the sages;’ [but] anti-Maimonideans [i.e., mystics opposed to Maimonidean rationalism] changed the semantics of this term to mean ‘faith in the sages.’ Since generally their audience is grammatically illiterate, the change remained unnoticed” (Faur 2003:43 footnote 154) [Square brackets are mine]. This means that the ‘well-known principle’ of *Emunat Chachamin* is not well-grounded in legal precedent. Nevertheless, the common perception continues to exist that *Emunat Chachamin* is a fundamental principle.

seventeenth-century rabbinic leadership were well-exposed to *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Once these ideas were endorsed by the leadership, the masses, practising *Emunat Chachamim*, would have subscribed to them and the mystical “way of life” and worldview of *Lurianic Kabbalah* were thus actively and subliminally passed on to the people. Interpreted this way, one can find support for Scholem and his notion of strong *Lurianic* undercurrents within *Sabbatianism*, whether the masses were aware of it or not (Michal 2022a:127). Idel, on the other hand, would never entertain such an argument as mine, because:

“[i]t cannot be posited that the diffusion of mystical complex theories within certain cloistered circles may sufficiently explain a mass movement” (Idel 1998:184).

Furthermore, Idel writes (most likely alluding to scholars like Scholem):

“The wider Jewish community was more interested in the ritual and the legendary sides than the ideological side of Lurianism. It could hardly have been impressed with the implicit eschatological elements of Lurianism, which today are given special emphasis in the academic literature” (Idel 1998:178).

Whichever position one adopts, *Sabbatian* ideology still emphasised that their era was a “new cosmic era,” calling for a “new Torah,” no matter the hermeneutical provenance of such a doctrine. In the final analysis, the old law is not just *outdated*, it is *subversive* and restricts the “new Torah.” It represents the old order of the *Galut* (*Exile*) and is reflective of the “Torah of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil.” The “new Torah,” instead, is the “Torah of the Tree of Life,” which has no prohibitions at all because it was given prior to the sin of Adam. This “new Torah” was to be the Torah of the Messianic era (Elior 2012:87).

In this regard, even earlier forms of *Kabbalah*, such as the fourteenth-century *Zoharic* work *Raya Mehemna* which similarly speaks of a hypothetical “new Torah,” could also suddenly be adopted, adapted and implemented as a reality in the here and now (Karr 2023:1).⁴⁰ The *Sabbatians* were comfortable to find support in all forms of early theoretical *Kabbalah* and concretised it to fit their times:

⁴⁰ There is much debate over the dating of the various *Zoharic* works (see entry on the *Zohar* in Terminologies).

“It is amazing how clearly these thoughts were expressed as early as one or two years after Sabbatai Zevi’s apostasy” (Scholem 1941a:312).

Incidentally, this is the second time in just three pages that Scholem, the great scholar of *Kabbalah*, expresses how “*amazing*” (Scholem 1941a:312) and how “*unbelievable*” (Scholem 1941a:309) the growth and development of *Sabbatianism* was.

Over and above advocating for a “*new Torah*,” R. Natan of Gaza’s student, R. Avraham Perez openly refers to the subversiveness of abiding by the old law. Writing as early as 1668 (just two years after the apostasy), he refers to those still adhering to rabbinic tradition as sinners.⁴¹ He does cover himself, though, by saying that the abrogation of the old law only fully activates in its complete form when the messianic process is entirely accomplished. Scholem (1941a:313) points out that this explanation of R. Avraham Perez is only a “*facade of orthodoxy*” – but this “*facade*” was to remain the hallmark of future moderate *Sabbatianism*.

The problem was that this “*facade*” created pockets of Jewish religious society that maintained a vigorous outward adherence to *Halacha* while believing internally that the truth no longer resided there. This is not a stable or sustainable theological position to adopt because it involves (holy) deception. Instead, it leaves itself open to new spiritual outcomes and antinomianism in one form or another.

Not all *Sabbatians*, though, were so moderate as to project even a normative “*facade*.” The resorting to, and reliance on, extreme mysticism, which was the only option available to explain the messianic conundrum of an apostatised Messiah, paved the way for more radical expressions of open antinomianism. The radical adherents maintained that it was not just Shabbatai Tzvi who could descend into the abyss of intentional sin, but because of the urgency of the hour, all the people needed to do so. Moreover, all were duty-bound to do so (Scholem 1941a:315). This antinomian element was not just a fringe group of radicals, but it “*engulfed a large part of the Sabbatian movement*” (Scholem 1941a:314). From a theological position, this approach led to an embellishment of the concept of *Aveira Lishema* (*Holy Sin*), where *Sabbatians* intentionally entered the realm of sin to ‘elevate’ it back to holiness.

⁴¹ R. Avraham Perez, *Igeret Magen Avraham* 1938:135.

2.2.3 Holy Sin⁴²

Related to the idea of a ‘renewal’ of the Torah, is the approach radical *Sabbatian* ideology took towards morality and the biblical concept of ‘shame.’ This antinomian approach became the hallmark of the later evolution from *Sabbatianism* towards *Frankism*. It was understood that part of the *Tikun* process was the ‘fixing’ and removal of shame. These conceptualisations of ‘fixing’ shame, like ‘Holy Sin,’ carried with them tremendous moral implications.

I do not wish to dwell on the imagery and eroticism that are inherent in some *Kabbalistic* texts and then developed further in *Sabbatian* literature, but a study of this nature would be remiss to ignore such matters entirely. The depiction of, and distinction between, masculine and feminine elements within the *Sefirot* (*divine emanations*) lends itself to this type of imagery. *Sabbatian Kabbalah* oftentimes takes this to bizarre, shocking and what can only be described as pornographic ends (Halperin 2008:3).

What is striking about this *genre* of mysticism is that it also depicts such activities as playing out within the construed complexity of the divine being itself. The language of ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ components within the heavenly realms is dealt with in the *Idra* sections of the *Zohar* and then further developed by *Lurianic Kabbalah*, but nowhere is it taken to such extreme lengths as in *Sabbatian Kabbalah*:

“Sabbatianism had its roots in an extravagant overstressing of certain aspects of Lurianism” (Scholem 1941a:320).

In an unexpected association of sexual engagement represented by the interplay between the Hebrew letters of the divine name, for example, these letters come to represent something vastly different from the more conservative and traditional interpretations they usually carry. Around the end of 1665, R. Natan of Gaza wrote in a widely circulated letter that “*served as a kind of ‘order of the day’ for the believers, and provided an outline of the messianic program*” (Scholem 1973:270), that (as Halperin paraphrases):

“the lofty, gracious, esoteric aspect of divinity that the Kabbalists called “Holy Ancient One” (*‘attiqā qaddisha*) would soon reveal itself

⁴² I have capitalised Holy Sin as it is a translation of the Hebrew mystical concept of *Aveira Lishma* (a sin for the sake of Heaven).

in its beneficence within the lower, manifest deity of ‘the Irascible [ill-tempered]⁴³ One’ (*ze’ir anpin*). Soon the on-again-off-again couplings of the male *Tiferet* and the female *Malkhut*, symbolized by the *vav* and final *hei* of the Tetragrammaton, would take on the permanence of the higher coupling of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, symbolized by the *yod* and the medial *hei*. The divine name would then shift from *YHVH* to *YHYH*, and ‘the Lord [*YHVH*] shall be [*yihyeh*] one and his name one’ (Zech. 14:9)” (Halperin 2008:3).

In that same letter,⁴⁴ R. Natan of Gaza writes about how the cosmic order had changed insofar as *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) was concerned, and there was only one thing left to do:

ולא נבקש עתה לעשות תיקונים אלא לקשט הכלה להחזירה פנים בפנים...כי בע"ש
בזמן שעבר כיון שהיה על ידי מעשינו היה מתחיל מעולם העשיה מה שעתה על ידי
גילוי דעתיקא, לכן היא באצילות בסוד פנים בפנים תחת היסוד

“It is no longer required to perform Tikunim [Lurianic rectifications], but only to adorn the Bride [i.e., the Shechina] and to turn her [towards the Groom] face to face...Because in the past [era of Lurianic Kabbalah], which was [likened to] the eve of the Sabbath [when labour is still permitted – the messianic destiny] was [still] in our hands. [That was when] we began [and operated] from the realm of Asiya [the lowest and most physical of the Four Worlds]. [However,] now, we are [in the Sabbath when work is not permitted] and [the messianic destiny is simply] a revelation of the Most High. Therefore, [the mission is accomplished] in Atzilut [the highest and most spiritual of the Four Worlds] through the secret of ‘face to face,’ under the [masculine Sefira] of Yesod” (R. Natan of Gaza in R. Yakov Sasportas, *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, 1954:8).⁴⁵

Around 1676, R. Yisrael Hazzan of Kastoria – adopting a similar imagery – writes that the recently departed Shabbatai Tzvi and the *Shechina* (*God’s presence*) were now

⁴³ Square brackets are mine.

⁴⁴ The letter is recorded by R. Yakov Sasportas and is taken from his *Sefer Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, edited by Isaiah Tishby (See section 2.2.2).

⁴⁵ Square brackets, translation and punctuation are mine.

destined to remain together continuously as partners. Both would adopt the external clothing of Islam and together enter the abyss of *Kelipa*. The Messiah, he explains based on the *Zohar*,⁴⁶ is the snake that bites the *Shechina*, and as a result, she gives birth. The Hebrew words *Mashiach* (Messiah) and *nachash* (snake) have the same numerical value (=358). Shabbatai Tzvi identified himself as a snake and signed his letters with an image of a twisting serpent (Halperin 1997: 292). But Shabbatai Tzvi is not the only snake because the *Shechina* is also a snake and both “*travel together in crooked paths – or, paths that seem crooked to the unseeing eyes of unbelief – in order to accomplish tiqqun ha-‘olam, the world’s mending*” (Halperin 2008:7). Again, the notion of holy deceit or Holy Sin is the only way to enter the abyss of *Kelipa* and to redeem it of its evil before its guise is recognized.

2.2.4 Crisis of messianic apostasy as an incubator for the new doctrine

The apostasy demonstrated (although only on a superficial level according to some of the fervent followers) that there was now a catastrophic disconnect:

“[T]he apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi, which was an entirely unforeseen occurrence, opened a gap between the two spheres in the drama of Redemption, the inner one of the soul and that of history” (Scholem 1941a:306).

The contradiction involving a Jewish Messiah, who had converted out of Judaism, clearly created a crisis of faith. Jacob Schacter (2001:2) observes that an additional factor, over and above the shock of the apostasy, was the fact that so many Jews:

“had been absolutely convinced that they had been living in the long-awaited messianic era.”

Now, not only was their Messiah not identified as Jewish, but the messianic era was no longer considered messianic. The inner mystical, and the outer pragmatic and historical experiences, were intensely disconnected on so many different levels. Scholem (1941a:306) explains that after the apostasy, it was necessary for an agonising choice – again a cosmic and mystical choice – to be made:

⁴⁶ *Zohar* III:249a-b.

“Every one had to ask himself whether he was willing to discover the truth about the expected redemption in the distressing course of history or in that inner reality which had revealed itself in the depths of the soul.”

Thus, one had to close one’s eyes to actuality and allow the story of redemption to play out – not in *reality* as one would normally expect of a Messiah, but in a new and unexpected messianic setting – in the *mind* and the *soul*. It wasn’t supposed to work, or end, like this. To deal with the *physical* crisis of non-redemption in the worst imaginable shape of apostasy, new *spiritual* doctrines had to replace the old expectations and bridge the gap between promise and fulfilment. This required new thinking which led to a new theology, a “*new Torah*” and a “*new cosmic order*” (see section 2.2.2).

Such an impossible feat had never before been demanded from any system of *Kabbalah*. And brilliantly (or perhaps deceptively) a new doctrine was developed which turned the tragic weakness of Shabbatai Tzvi into its most powerful tool. Only radical mysticism of the most extreme type could resolve this paradox. It had to be a mysticism that demanded cognitive dissonance, not intellectual allegiance: Shabbatai Tzvi was still the Messiah. However, he had to enter the depths of *Kelipah*, into the innermost *husks of evil*, to elevate the *Kelipah* and transform it into good.

This new doctrine could claim to have drawn upon remarkably similar *Lurianic Kabbalistic* ideas such as those espoused by R. Yitzchak Luria’s student, R. Chaim Vital (1543-1620) who said that the Messiah will only come when “*good and evil are finally separated*” (Scholem 1941a:305). Although R. Chaim Vital certainly did not speak about messianic apostasy (and had passed away forty-six years before the apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi), the *Sabbatian Kabbalists* explained that Shabbatai Tzvi had taken it upon himself, through his apostasy, to go to such unimagined places to affect the ultimate *Birurim* (*Separations*) of good from evil (see section 2.2.5). The *Sabbatian Kabbalists* could develop and expand on this *Lurianic* theme by expediently borrowing yet another *Lurianic* notion that messianic redemption carried more *spiritual* weight than that of its mere “*historical and political aspects*” (Scholem 1941a:305). This meant that a negative historical reality could not displace a contradictory and positive spiritual reality. This way, *Sabbatians* used *Lurianic Kabbalistic* material in concert with other *Lurianic* principles (i.e., the notion that the Messiah will only come

after the ‘fallen sparks’ have been redeemed – plus the principle that spiritual redemption outweighs practical redemption) and reworked them to arrive at conclusions that had crossed the line into a theological “*heresy*” far removed from the original *Lurianic* tenor.

The new *Sabbatian* doctrine had to defend the mission of Shabbatai Tzvi and recast it even in its failure and particularly in light of the most “*abominable act known to the Jewish mind*” (Scholem 1941a:309), namely, apostasy:

“It seems almost unbelievable that a movement based upon such foundations should have been able to influence so great a number of people” (Scholem 1941a:309).

Only an extreme mysticism or doctrine of paradox could solve this unexpected messianic predicament. Perhaps this idea of what one might call a powerful ‘counter mysticism’ emerging to deal with the messianic crisis, could be read – contra Idel – as support for Scholem that *Sabbatianism* was indeed birthed in the messianic tensions inherent within *Lurianic Kabbalah* (see section 2.2.2). In other words – with Scholem – the *Sabbatian* movement founded upon the *Lurianic* “*drama of cosmic importance*” (Scholem 1941a:305) and *catastrophe*, could only escape the conundrum of messianic apostasy by creating an equal but opposite theory of cosmic *drama* and *catastrophe* now relating to Shabbatai Tzvi. In my view, no earlier traditional models of quiet, personal or astrological *Kabbalah*, as Idel suggests, could lend any material assistance to the unprecedented *Sabbatian* messianic crisis.

In keeping with this *Lurianic* notion of messianic *drama* and *catastrophe* as reworked by *Sabbatian Kabbalah*, let us now examine the difference between a “*passive*” and “*active*” Messiah.

2.2.5 *Lurianic* “passive Messiah” and *Sabbatian* “active Messiah”

It was not only the grand cosmic changes that concerned the *Sabbatian* theorists but also the matter of the miniature of Jewish law. From a traditional, ritual, legal and *Halachic* point of view, *Sabbatianism* posed some immediate challenges:

“The classical nomian acts prescribed by halakhah are now not the exclusive vehicles of the theurgical activities, as in the theosophical-

theurgical Kabbalah; rather, every activity as such is informed by a peculiar redemptive power” (Idel 1998:204).

The sacrosanct *Halacha* was no longer the only authorised means to give expression to religious adherence and induce theurgical heavenly favour as it had always been in the past in the worldview of traditional *Kabbalah*. Now other ideas, concepts and practices began to take on new meanings.

For example, R. Natan of Gaza’s student, R. Avraham Perez, in his *Igeret Magen Avraham*, reconstrues some of the biblical Psalms to relate to the new Messiah (Scholem 1941a:419, note 48).⁴⁷ R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo is recorded as saying that because of Israel’s sins, all were destined to become *Marranos* and to live in a spiritual twilight zone. However, by Shabbatai Tzvi taking this punishment upon himself – as only he was spiritually equipped to do so⁴⁸ – Israel has been spared the burden of such a fate (R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo in *Inyanei Shabbatai Tzvi*, 1913:87-92).

This approach, it must be noted, may have been an adaptation, or distortion, of the *Lurianic* notion of *Birur* and *Haalat Nitzotzot* (separating and elevating fallen sparks). In its original *Lurianic* form, it represented Israel being scattered among the nations to ‘raise the fallen sparks of holiness’ but the *Sabbatian* model was radically innovative. Shabbatai Tzvi, through the means of his apostasy, was the one individual fated to affect the final release of good from the stranglehold of evil. This tenet of *Sabbatian* faith, as mentioned earlier (see section 2.2.2), marks a turning point and is where Scholem (1941a:311) differentiates between what he terms the “*orthodox*” and the “*heretical version*” of *Kabbalah*, also referred to as “*Sabbatian heresy*.”

A similar innovation of R. Natan of Gaza – which Scholem describes as being accomplished with “*considerable success*” – was his ability to convince his followers that the older and traditional process of *Tikun* (spiritual rectification) had changed. No

⁴⁷ See Avraham Perez, *Igeret Magen Avraham*, Scholem, 1938, *Mekitzei Nirdamim*. Scholem notes that he had mistakenly attributed this work to Cardozo (Scholem 1941a:420, note 50). The original title still bears testimony to this error: *Igeret Magen Avraham meEretz haMaarav: chubera kenireh biydei Avraham Mikha'el Kordozo*. It mistakenly states that this work was “*apparently composed by Avraham Miguel Cardozo*.”

⁴⁸ Two centuries later, R. Nachman of Breslov, adopted a similar approach when he warned his followers not to read the rationalist writings of Maimonides. He claimed that only he could read that literature and thereby ‘elevate’ it to a loftier state through the process of *Tikun*. This idea of one man taking the burden of the people upon himself was to become an oft repeated motif in *Chassidism*.

longer are good deeds and the fulfilment of the *Mitzvot* (*religious observances*) sufficient to 'raise the fallen sparks.' Now, in the final stages of redemption, a new model is required where a certain, chosen individual must himself be prepared to enter the *Kelipot* and perform the difficult task of releasing the last vestiges of good from the *husks of evil*. And just like during the time of the biblical Exodus, when the *Shechina* (*God's presence*) had to descend into the depths of Egypt which represented the worst form of evil, so too must Shabbatai Tzvi descend to the nethermost regions of depravity. This paradox becomes the essence of the *Sabbatian* messianic idea:

"In order to fulfil his mission he must condemn himself through his own acts" (Scholem 1941a:311).

Elaborating on the *Sabbatian* model of the Messiah entering the *Kelipot*, I want to highlight Joseph Dan's view on the important distinction between *Lurianic* messianism and *Sabbatian* messianism. Counterintuitively, *Lurianic Kabbalah* did not assign the Messiah with a specific role. Instead:

"the Messiah in the Lurianic doctrine is the result of the process of redemption rather than its cause" (Dan in Tishby 2008:xxi).⁴⁹

Scholem (1941a:305) has already noted R. Chaim Vital's teaching that the Messiah will only come when "*good and evil are finally separated*" (see section 2.2.4). In other words, the *Lurianic Messiah* has no special messianic prerogative over lesser mortals in that he plays the same role as everyone else in elevating the fallen sparks. In this understanding, the Messiah figure does not 'bring' the redemption, he is the 'result' of the redemption.

This 'passive' notion of the *Lurianic Messiah*, was to fundamentally change after being radically reworked by R. Natan of Gaza. He taught that at the heart of the evil realm lay an essence so densely satanic and evil that nothing and no one could redeem it. All the people in the universe could lift all the fallen sparks and it would not dent or elevate this core of depravity:

⁴⁹ Joseph Dan writing in the Introduction to Isaiah Tishby's *Messianic Mysticism*.

“[Only] an incarnated divine power...could focus the spiritual power of the Jewish people as a whole and...face this core of evil and vanquish it” (Dan in Tishby 2008:xxi).⁵⁰

This supernal power, or more specifically “*incarnated divine power*,” was only to be found in the ‘active’ *Sabbatian Messiah*:

“This was the first time in the history of Jewish messianism that the role of the Messiah was theologically defined, and he was presented as the intermediary between God and the people...” (Dan in Tishby 2008:xxi).

This essential reframing of messianic theology can become a ‘clue,’ perhaps even a ‘rubric,’ to deciphering, if not proving, the *Sabbatian* nature of future *Kabbalists* who came under suspicion that they were secret *Sabbatians*. Joseph Dan employs this ‘clue’ to show the *Sabbatian* underpinnings of R. Moshe David Valle, known as the *Ramdav*, a student of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. He was inspired by a visionary called a *Mashpia* (*one who transmits*) and he referred to the Messiah as *haTzadik haMevarer* (*the Righteous man who Separates [the good from the evil]*) (see section 3.1.8). The ‘active’ *Sabbatian Messiah* had thus become the archetype for some models of future Messiahs (see the reference to R. Natan Nata Spira in section 4.7).

I would suggest that by extending this ‘clue’ or ‘rubric’ – concerning the difference between an ‘active’ and ‘passive’ Messiah – to other messianic models within the *Chassidic* movement, one may also be able to determine whether or not the *Chassidic* movement continued to rely on the *Lurianic* model of a ‘passive’ Messiah who is the *result* of the messianic era, or replaced it with the *Sabbatian* model of an ‘active’ Messiah who *heralds* the messianic era (although, see section 2.2.8 for a possible counter-argument, where *Chassidism* adopted a ‘supernatural’ model of the Messiah and therefore broke with the *Sabbatian* model of an ‘intellectual’ Messiah).⁵¹

⁵⁰ Square brackets are mine.

⁵¹ An anecdotal observation of an expression that is ubiquitous in some contemporary *Chassidic* circles is “*We need Mashiach*,” or “*We want Mashiach now*.” On a cursory level, this appears to be a departure from the more classical *Lurianic* notion of a ‘passive’ Messiah who is the ‘result’ of the messianic era. A purist *Lurianic Kabbalist* might wish for ‘a *Messianic era now*,’ rather than “*Mashiach now*.” Unless, of course, one simply argues as some do, that the messianic epoch has already arrived and all that is needed is the actual manifestation of the messianic figure.

In the *Sabbatian* movement, however, because the Messiah was no longer the ‘passive’ or ‘resultant’ being of *Lurianic Kabbalah*, but now an ‘active’ being and an “intermediary” and “incarnated divine power,” Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy was wholly transformed into an act of cosmic necessity, with the Messiah having to urgently enter the ‘void’ and tame the ‘Mindless Light.’

2.2.6 The Messiah’s role in taming the “Mindless Light”

Borrowing from elements of earlier *Kabbalah*, the R. Natan of Gaza explained that during the creation process, the Infinite One, the *Ein Sof* – the divine *Source* – together with its divine *Emanation*, withdrew or contracted parts of the *Emanating Light* back into the original *Source* of the *Ein Sof* to make ‘space’ for creation. This resulted in a ‘void’ in the *Emanating Light*. But this ‘void’ was not entirely empty because remaining within this ‘vacated space’ – also known in *Sabbatian* parlance as the *Tehiru* (*Abyss*) – was a residue of the *Primordial Light*. This *Primordial Light*, in turn, was divided into *אור שאין בו מחשבה* (*light that has thought*) and *אור שיש בו מחשבה* (*light that has no thought*). The *Mindful Light* wanted to build while the *Mindless Light* wanted to destroy. The *Mindless Light* was not essentially evil, it was just mindless, wanting to return to its original state where it was indistinguishable from its unity with infinity. Relative to the existing world, though, it was regarded as being evil because it opposed the creation. The created world remains unstable as long as this *Mindless Light* is still active. The ‘active’ *Sabbatian* Messiah’s role is to enter the *Tehiru* (*Abyss*) and tame the *Mindless Light*. His goal is to endure suffering and he must return to the *Tehiru* again and again until the *Mindless Light* is finally restrained and fused with the *Mindful Light* (Halperin 2008:4-5).

2.2.7 Division within the Godhead between “First Cause” and “God of Israel”

Besides the difference between an ‘active’ and ‘passive’ Messiah (see sections 2.2.5 and 2.2.6), another area where *Sabbatian Kabbalah* digressed from orthodox *Kabbalah* into the realm of “heresy” was R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo’s notion that the “First Cause” – or the *Hidden God* – is entirely removed from the affairs of this world. Up to this point in time, no rabbis had so openly challenged the oneness and indivisibility of God. It is correct that the more rationalist rabbis have often confronted the traditional or orthodox *Kabbalistic* concept of the Ten *Sefirot* (*Emanations*), for

example, as being divisive of God's unity, but the *Kabbalists* always retort that God is still one. An example of this challenge to traditional *Kabbalah* can be seen in the writing of the father of Jewish rationalism, Maimonides (1135-1204):

"If...someone believes that He is one, but possesses a certain number of essential attributes, he says in his words that He is one, but believes Him in his thoughts to be many. This resembles what the Christians say: namely, that He is one but also three, and that the three are one" (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1963:111).

Maimonides lived about eighty years before the publication of the *Zohar* in around 1290, so he may have been unaware of the *Zoharic* notion of the *Sefirot* (*Emanations* or *Spheres*),⁵² but in principle, he is firmly opposed to the mystical categorization of the division of divine powers into separate energies, emanations, or spheres. Maimonides emphasises the idea that God is strictly monotheistic and fundamentally unknowable.

Another case in point is R. Yitzchak ben Sheshet Perfet (1326-1408) known as *Rivash*, who emphatically objected to the *Sefirot*. He held that the *Sefirot* were an even more elaborate division of the Godhead than the Christian Trinity because instead of *three*, the *Kabbalists* now had *ten* divisions. *Rivash* pointed out that when the *Kabbalists* pray, they turn to the different *Sefirot*.⁵³ In some instances, *Kabbalists* further believed that the *Sefirot* went so far as to pray to the First Cause (Shapiro 2004:43). Although popular, these *Kabbalistic* conceptualisations were challenged by the rationalist rabbis as an affront to basic monotheism. Even the prophetic *Kabbalist*, R. Avraham Abulafia (1240-1291) was able to find common ground with the rationalists⁵⁴ by opposing the idea of the *Sefirotic* division of the Godhead and similarly comparing the *Sefirot* to the Trinity (Shapiro 2004:40).

⁵² Unless the *Zoharic Sefirotic* concepts were developing and being discussed during Maimonides' lifetime, before being committed to writing around 1290.

⁵³ Yitzchak ben Sheshet Perfet, *She'elot uTeshuvot haRivash*, no. 157. Although an anti-*Kabbalist*, the *Rivash* had issues with Aristotelian philosophy, particularly the idea of the eternity of the universe and the denial of providence.

⁵⁴ Counterintuitively, the radical mystic Abulafia, had written some commentaries on Maimonides' rational work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Moshe Idel explains Abulafia as trying to create some form of synthesis between rationalism and mysticism. Online source: You tube moshe idel abulafia - Google Search. Retrieved on 05 December 2022.

The *Kabbalists*, on the other hand, argue that there is no division at all. R. Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) explains that God and the *Sefirot* “are all one complete unity” (Cordovero 1863:4.4).

The *Zohar*, emphasises the indivisibility of God and the *Sefirot* by claiming that Amalek defeated the Israelites because the latter had misunderstood this unity.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Marc Shapiro (2004:4) writes:

“the fact remains that, even after accepting the kabbalistic assumptions, there have been times when it is difficult for all but the most vigorous defenders of the sefirotic system not to see in it a departure from the doctrine of the unity of God.”

Traditional *Kabbalah* sees the *Ein Sof* (*Infinite One*) or the *Ilat hallot* (*First Cause*), essentially, as an unknowable entity. Yet the “light” or *Sefirotic Emanations* from the First Cause are what brings the world into existence and through them, God maintains providence over creation.

However, with the advent of the *Sabbatian* ideologue R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo, we see for the first time in *Kabbalistic* literature, that the First Cause is separated from the Emanations and has no relationship with creation. The First Cause, the *Hidden God* is truly hidden. Instead, it is only the Demiurge, the lesser ‘worker’ God, called the “*God of Israel*,” who created the world and provides for it. The “*God of Israel*” is *not* the First Cause. The prayers are not addressed to the First Cause but to the “*God of Israel*.” This division of the Godhead was considered by the traditionalists as a line crossed and the beginning of a *Sabbatian* heresy (Shapiro 2004:41). For Scholem (1941a:311), the line crossed appears to have been the apostasy and its mystical justification. Either way, *Sabbatianism* had crossed many lines when compared to traditional Judaism.

Scholem convincingly suggests that the *Sabbatian* idea of a split in the Godhead has its roots in the dualism of the Gnostic thought of the second and third

⁵⁵ *Zohar* II:64b. “[T]hey desired to know whether the Divine manifestation which they had experienced was that of the Ancient One, the All-hidden One, the Transcendent...or the ‘Small Countenance’...If so, it may be asked, why were they punished? Because they differentiated between these two aspects in God and ‘tempted the Lord’; for they said to themselves: ‘If it is the One, we shall pray in one way, and if it is the Other, we shall pray in another way’...Then came Amalek...” (*The Zohar*, vol. III, *Beshalah*, Translation by Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, Soncino Press, has 1949:202).

centuries. The Gnostics believed that the *Hidden God* – who was a loving God – was separate from the *Jewish God*. The knowledge of the hidden and benevolent God is called “*gnosis*.” It was not the *Hidden God* but the *Jewish God* who gave the Hebrew Bible:

“The term *Jewish God* or *God of Israel* is abusive and meant to be so”
(Scholem 1941a:322).

Scholem (1941a:322) explains that like Gnosticism, “*this same dualism is to be found in Sabbatian theology*.” R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo engages the Gnostic model and maintains that religion has nothing to do with the First Cause. Or, better put, the First Cause is not interested in religion. R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo claims that Nimrod, Pharaoh, the pagans and Aristotle all worshipped the First Cause. Religion came from the God of Sinai, the God of Israel, *Elo-hei Yisrael*.

However, while the Gnostics disparaged the God of Israel, R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo disparaged the First Cause or hidden and unknowable God. R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo’s theology highlights the common theme running throughout *Sabbatian* ideology, that everything involves some form of dualism or, to coin a phrase, ‘marranoism’ (as in the dualistic beliefs of the *Marranos*, many of whom vacillated between Judaism and Christianity. R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo was born to a Spanish Marrano family and raised as a Catholic). It, therefore, comes as no surprise that for *Sabbatians*, even:

“their God no less than their Messiah bears the mark of such self-contradiction and disintegration” (Scholem 1941a:324).

It must be noted that at least one traditional *Kabbalist* (although some suspect he was also a crypto-*Sabbatian*), R. Yitzchak Lopes of Aleppo, endorsed R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo’s dualistic depictions of the separation between the First Cause and the God of Israel. He found an unpublished version of R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo’s work, *Boker Avraham*, and proclaimed that although he did not know who the author was, it must have been written by a great *Kabbalist* (Lopez 1847:101a-103b). All this is an indication of the mystical sophistication of *Sabbatian Kabbalah* and points, once again, to the underlying tensions noted by this study, between definitions of mystical ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ which are soon to be mirrored in the *Chassidic* period.

2.2.8 “Secret of the Godhead” – Intellectual or supernatural Messiah

The *Sabbatian* ideologues continued to expand and further develop their intricate interpretations and reworkings of the ‘traditional’ *Kabbalistic* Messiah and the messianic age. R. Natan of Gaza, for example, taught that the messianic age is *not* a time of miracles and wonders but rather the marking of a special intellectual bond between God and the Messiah. This is known as the *Sod haElo-hut* (*Secret of the Godhead*). R. Natan of Gaza writes in a letter:

שמהות המשיח הוא להשיג גדולה זאת כ"מ [כל מי] שיאמר שרוצה להאמין במשיח
ע"פ אות הוא עובד ע"ז...ובכלל האמור הוא שישג גדולת האלהות כי זהו ענין
המשיח ואם לאו אינו משיח אפילו שיעשה כל אות' ומופתים שבעולם ח"ו להאמין בו
שהרי זה מתנבא לע"ז

"The essence of the Messiah is to comprehend this greatness [of God. However,] whoever says he wants to believe in the Messiah through signs [and miracles,] is [compared to] one who serves idols. [Instead,] the stated principle is that [the Messiah] must comprehend the greatness of God. This [comprehension] is the essence of the Messiah. If [the Messiah] does not [display this comprehension] he is not the Messiah, even if he performs all the signs and wonders in the world – for he is then [just] a prophet to idolatry" (R. Natan of Gaza in Scholem 1956:192).⁵⁶

This sober messianic doctrine that minimizes the role of “*signs and wonders*” appears to be more sophisticated than the popular version, or what Idel (1998:197) refers to as the “*apocalyptic tradition*” which places more emphasis on the supernatural. Theoretically, with his dismissal of the role of supernatural messianism, R. Natan of Gaza was perhaps closer to Abulafia’s mystical, and ironically also to Maimonides’ rational, conceptualisations of the messianic age, devoid of blatant supernatural elements (Michal 2022a:141). But, certainly, in the case of Maimonides’ rationalism, that is about as far as any parallels can be drawn.

A noteworthy observation concerning R. Natan of Gaza’s doctrine of an intimate intellectual bond between the Messiah and the Godhead, is that it fundamentally

⁵⁶ This letter of R. Natan of Gaza is preserved in Scholem (1956:192). Translation, square brackets and punctuation are mine.

changed the way Jews had hitherto viewed Jesus. Until this time, it was believed that specifically because Jesus had become deified, Jews had distanced themselves from him. Now, according to R. Natan of Gaza, deification was *not* the problem, because “*that is just the rank that the Messiah should attain*” (Idel 1998:202). Regarding *Sabbatian* messianic deification, we mentioned earlier that according to R. Yisrael Hazzan, Shabbatai Tzvi and the *Shechina* were to remain together continuously as partners (see section 2.2.3); and as Tishby pointed out, the *Sabbatian* notion of an ‘active’ Messiah gave him the elevated status of being an “*intermediary*” and even an “*incarnated divine power*” (see section 2.2.5). In this formulation, the *Sabbatian* problem with Jesus was not the *deification* of the Messiah – as is commonly perceived – but rather that Jesus presented the image of a *wonder worker*. This further supports the notion of how much of an anathema the conception of *supernatural messianism* was in the early thought of *Sabbatianism*. Shabbatai Tzvi and R. Natan of Gaza even tried to affect a *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) for Jesus (see section 6.4).

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the *Chassidic* movement was founded by the Baal Shem Tov whose very title “*baal shem*” indicates a wonder-working healer. This may have theological implications if it can be successfully argued that the *Chassidim* saw in their leader a messianic figure. This is because an emphasis on a wonder-working healer-leader may mitigate in favour of *Chassidism*’s break with *Sabbatianism* at least insofar as their messianic definitions were concerned (see section 2.2.5, however, for a possible counter-argument). In any case, as mentioned earlier, there is scholarly debate over the extent the role of messianism played in the early *Chassidic* period (see section 2.5.4).

2.2.9 Synthesis

Having noted how the *Sabbatian* mystical doctrines of R. Natan of Gaza and R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo departed radically from classical and *Lurianic Kabbalah*, enabling “*orthodox Kabbalah*” to morph into what Scholem observes was now officially considered “*heretical Kabbalah*” with its adaptation of a theology of a “*new Torah*”; how the notion of “*Holy Sin*” was adopted; how the apostasy acted as an incubator to develop an emerging *Sabbatian* theology; how and why the *Sabbatian* ‘active’ Messiah differed from the earlier *Lurianic* ‘passive Messiah’; how the Messiah’s role was conceived as ‘taming the *Mindless Light*’ in the *Tehiru* (*Abyss*); how the First Cause

was separated from the God of Israel; how the *Sabbatians* elevated the notion of an “*intellectual bond*” between the Messiah and God over the “*wonder-working Messiah*”; – we now examine how these doctrines began to penetrate and effectively diffuse into the same environment that was soon to birth the *Chassidic* movement.

2.3 Spread of *Sabbatianism* in the post-apostasy period

2.3.1 Introduction

Although it is abundantly clear that Shabbatai Tzvi had an overwhelming following before 1666 (Michal 2022a:104), it is the post-apostasy period particularly – when the movement is commonly thought to have entered into decline – that arguably became the most productive phase in the development and dissemination of *Sabbatian* ideology. This unexpected and often-unnoticed period of ideological expansion in a perceived ‘no man’s land’ between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, forms the mainstay of this study.

2.3.2 Penetration of *Sabbatian* literature into the eighteenth century

The importance of tracing the ideological trajectory the *Sabbatian* movement followed when its influences were least anticipated, is not lost on Gershom Scholem because:

“[The significant role]⁵⁷ Sabbatianism played in the spiritual development of Jewry during the generations that followed, is generally underrated” (Scholem 1941a:299).

We shall demonstrate that besides the development of pre-apostasy *Sabbatian* writings, the most creative and prolific writing period occurred during the post-apostasy era after 1666. R. Natan of Gaza wrote his *magnum opus* entitled *Sefer haBeria* in 1670, four years *after* the apostasy. The other great disseminator of *Sabbatian* ideology, R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo, the former *Marrano*, began writing much later. In the case of R. Heshil Tzoref whom we shall deal with in greater detail further in this study (see section 4.7), we see that:

⁵⁷ Square brackets are mine.

“His literary activity began with the [messianic] awakening of 5426 [1666], and never quietened down...and continued for a period of decades...and he wrote all in all probability thousands of pages” (Liebes 2007:3).⁵⁸

Liebes (2007:3, footnote 10) explains that there are extant writings from as late as 1695 which indicate an extensive period of at least 29 years of R. Heshil Tzoref’s literary contribution to *Sabbatian* ideology – most of which were within the post-apostasy period.

This flurry of writing activity shows that *Sabbatian* ideology was being formulated and produced on many fronts primarily during the very short time between Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy and the Baal Shem Tov (Scholem 1941a:310). Numerically, *Sabbatianism* may have been greater and more open prior to 1666, but doctrinally it flourished when everyone thought the movement was in decline.

This attestation to the flourishing of post-Shabbatai Tzvi *Sabbatianism* is surprisingly corroborated by a much later source from the *Donmeh*⁵⁹ (the *Sabbatian* Jews who had converted en masse to Islam together with Shabbatai Tzvi, see section 3.1.4). The *Donmeh* writer and educator İbrahim Alâettin Gövsa (1889-1949),⁶⁰ the Director of the Karakaş Dönme Girl’s School in the 1920s, confirms:

“I have personally witnessed how traditions and customs of Shabbatai Tzevi still predominate in their [the *Donmeh*’s]⁶¹ lives. In fact, I have found half-Hebrew, half-Spanish [Ladino] prayers in the notebooks of seven and eight-year-old Shabbatean [Dönme] children that their families had them memorise...it cannot be denied that the memory of Shabbatai Tzevi is still kept energetically alive” (Gövsa 1939:6).⁶²

Gövsa also testifies that Donmeh children began their prayers with the Judeo-Spanish phrase:

⁵⁸ Translation is mine. Liebes, however, does speak of three periods of R. Heshil Tzoref’s *spiritual* awakenings, the first beginning as early as 1648 (see section 2.5.1.1). It seems, though, that his main *literary* activity was from 1666.

⁵⁹ The name *Donmeh* is taken from the Turkish word *Dönmeler*, which means *Converts*.

⁶⁰ According to Marc Baer (2010:177), Gövsa was a member of the *Karakaş* branch of the *Donmeh*. The other two branches were the *Kapancı* and the *Yakubi* (Baer 2010:174).

⁶¹ Square brackets are mine.

⁶² Translations from Gövsa are from Baer (2010).

“In the blessed name of Shabbatai Tzevi, who governs half the world”
(Gövsä 1939:77).

Most significant is Gövsä’s emphasis that:

“the traces that Shabbatai Tzevi left behind are more important than
the movement during his lifetime” (Gövsä 1939:3).

Baer (2010:301, footnote 68) records that as late as 1943 when Yitzchak Ben-Zvi, the second President of the State of Israel, visited descendants of the *Donmeh*, he found some of the *Donmeh* prayers still in use.

Granted, the *Donmeh* was a movement comprised of descendants of Jewish converts to Islam, and were not open Jews in the full sense of the term, still, these sources show a parallel *Sabbatian* tradition that kept *Sabbatian* teachings alive, even possibly expanding them after Shabbatai Tzvi’s death and well into the twentieth century.

When dealing with the *Sabbatian* movement and its ideology, it is important to remember that it was not a homogenous structure. Instead, it was a composite of multiple factions. The *Sabbatian* exposé, R. Moshe Chagiz (1671-c.1750) writing in 1714, confirms and documents the nuanced ideologies of distinct ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ branches of the *Sabbatian* movement as follows:

“And of every evil action which we see them [i.e., the moderate group] commit, not only in thought but also in reality, they say that this is precisely how it must be, and that there is a mystery to the matter, and a *Tikkun* and a salvaging of holiness from the *Kelipoth*...

But another sect among them [i.e., the radical group] turns the heresy to a different purpose...with the arrival of Sabbatai Zevi the sin of Adam has already been corrected and the good selected out of the evil...a new Torah has become law under which all manner of things formerly prohibited are now permitted, not least the categories of sexual intercourse hitherto prohibited...[they claim that] there is no sin

or harm in these things” (R. Moshe Chagiz, *Sefer Shever Posheim*, 1714:33b).⁶³

Considering the late date of R. Moshe Chagiz’s writing – 1714 – it is evident that these concerns were still very real forty-eight years *after* the apostasy, confirming that *Sabbatianism* was thriving well into the post-Shabbatai Tzvi period and penetrating the era of the Baal Shem Tov as well. Despite the later censorship, there still exists:

“a mass of evidence on the development of Sabbatianism between 1700 and 1760” (Scholem 1941a:316).

The dates 1700-1760 significantly correspond to the lifetime of the Baal Shem Tov, when many conventional versions of history speak only of the development of ‘new’ and ‘original’ *Chassidic* teachings. Such versions do not usually describe a contemporaneous or parallel expansion of earlier *Sabbatian* doctrines, because the perception persists that:

“the [Sabbatian] sect of Shabbatai Tzvi had already dissipated by this time [of the Baal Shem Tov]”⁶⁴ (Perl in Rabinowitsch 1941:83).⁶⁵

To emphasise the point that *Sabbatians* had its greatest growth spurts after – sometimes long after – Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy and passing, it was still considered shameful two hundred years later, during the nineteenth century, to mention *Sabbatian* ancestry or that a:

“reputed scholar or well-known family had anything to do with it [Sabbatianism]⁶⁶...which might under no condition be publicly mentioned” (Scholem 1941a:300-301).

⁶³ Square brackets are mine. R. Moshe Chagiz’s book, *Sefer Posheim* gives the place of printing as Amsterdam, which was an intentional error as it was printed in London. Online source: <https://www.virtualjudaica.com/Listing/Details/1227393/Sever-Poshim-R-Moses-Hagiz-London-1714>. Retrieved on 16 November 2022. Depending on the source Hagiz/Chagiz is alternately spelled as חג״ז, חג״ז, חג״ז or חג״ז.

⁶⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁶⁵ In this instance, Perl refers to his hypothesis that the *Sabbatian* manuscript of *Sefer haTzoref*, by R. Heshil Tzoref, had come into the possession of the Baal Shem Tov and was not recognised as a *Sabbatian* work. Perl explains that the apparent lack of knowledge concerning the *Sabbatian* provenance of *Sefer haTzoref*, was essentially because the movement had already depleted itself, with just a few “*nisharim*” (*remnants*) remaining.

⁶⁶ Square brackets are mine.

While not often acknowledged or recognised, there is much evidence that supports the position that *Sabbatian* ideology was on the ascension after the apostasy and not on the decline, and that it had penetrated well into the *Chassidic* period of the eighteenth century.

2.3.3 *Marranos* and *Conversos* as carriers of the new doctrine

The new mystical doctrine of the post-apostasy period, however, did have one important component on its side – the theology of the *Marranos* for whom the notion of apostasy would have resonated. The easterly migration of Spanish *Marranos* and *Conversos* had begun much earlier. Although the date 1492 is given for the expulsion of Jews from Spain, the persecutions were not a singular event but rather an ongoing process beginning almost a century earlier in 1391. This means that for many generations, Jewish families had lived with their status vacillating somewhere between inwardly being Jewish and outwardly living as Christians. Estimates are that during that period “*hundreds of thousands*” of Jews had been compelled to convert to Christianity. Even those Jews who later returned to Judaism after leaving Spain, continued to exhibit a form of dualism with a “*peculiar spiritual make-up*” (Scholem 1941a:309). This dualism and ability to live in and out of two religions simultaneously was something not unfamiliar to these *Marranos* who had by now migrated to the “*centers of Sabbatian enthusiasm*” (Sharot 1982:101-2).

Stephen Sharot builds on this *Marrano* factor serving as a natural conduit for Scholem’s notion of religious dualism:

“It is possible that Abraham [Cardozo, the Sabbatian ideologue] and other former marranos were attracted to a faith that reminded them, consciously or unconsciously, of the faith of their childhood...Abraham Cardozo believed that the Christians were correct in presenting a suffering messiah, but that they were mistaken in their belief that the messiah must die” (Sharot 1982:121).⁶⁷

This suggests that the idea of a suffering messiah like Shabbatai Tzvi, battling with the forces of evil in a spiritual exile brought on by his apostasy, may not be all that radical for a former *Marrano* – or “*former Catholic*” (Halperin 2008:6). Scholem acknowledges

⁶⁷ Square brackets are mine.

this and is similarly convinced of the role the *Marranos* played in resolving the paradox of an apostatised Jewish Messiah:

“I doubt that whether without this spiritual disposition on the part of the numerous Sefardic communities [i.e., the *Marranos*] the new doctrine would have taken sufficient root” (Scholem 1941a:310).⁶⁸

One can understand how a familiar concept of apostasy and moving between two religions would have struck a personal chord with the many *Marranos* and *Conversos* who, to some extent, had been at such a crossroads themselves. Many *Conversos* had become weary of the rabbinate and rabbinic Judaism. They had escaped the clutches of the Christian priests who coerced them to convert, and now they faced an equal but opposite unexpected tyranny of rabbis and their strictures:

“They had rejected the authority of the church and the priesthood, and they were now expected to accept the discipline of the Jewish community and its rabbis, to which many educated marranos felt intellectually superior” (Sharot 1982:107).

Thus, despite the setback of the apostasy, the *Sabbatian* movement could not have picked a better time to arrive on the stage of Jewish history than when the community was made up of large numbers of *Marranos* and *Conversos*. Raised as Christians, many of the *Conversos* knew little of rabbinic Judaism and *Halacha* (*Jewish ritual law*). In their naiveté they expected to merge with a glorified and imagined ‘biblical people’ they had read about in the Bible. These exiled *Conversos* would have welcomed a more ‘protestant’ or ‘reformation approach’ than the unanticipated and uncompromising rabbinic Judaism they had encountered.

It was in this atmosphere that new mystical and messianic literature began to emerge and thrive, particularly in the post-apostasy, or “*heretical*” period. It may be said to have begun with Shabbatai Tzvi’s promoter and ‘prophet,’ R. Natan of Gaza, who wrote his *Drush haTaninim* (*Treatise of the Dragons*) only months before Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy in 1666. It compared the suffering of his master, Shabbatai Tzvi the Messiah, to Job, whose:

⁶⁸ Square brackets are mine.

“sufferings, prefigure how Sabbatai’s soul suffers in the demonic abyss” (Halperin 2008:3).

These ideas would have found a receptive ear amongst the large *Converso* community. They may have acted as carriers and disseminators of the new doctrine of dualism – with people as well as their Messiah, moving in and out of different religions – that made the crisis of apostasy more readily acceptable.

2.3.4 Censorship, coding, nomenclature, *Kabbalists* and shared boundaries

Having identified the officially “*heretical*” and post-apostasy period as being the most dominant and powerful ideological phase of *Sabbatianism*, and shown that its success was due – to a large extent, although not exclusively – to a receptive community of *Marranos* and *Conversos* used to a form of dualism, we now confront a great challenge to any student of *Sabbatian* ideology, namely, censorship:

“I could go on telling about my own difficulties in trying to penetrate into this vanished world...[because] most, if not all, the theological documents which could throw some light upon it have undoubtedly been destroyed...everything was done to minimize its importance. It became obligatory to depict it as an affair of a very small minority and to pretend that there had been from the start a sharp division between orthodox believers and the heretics” (Scholem 1941a:300).⁶⁹

For these reasons, it became necessary for crypto-*Sabbatians* to resort to writing in code, even well beyond 1666 and deeply into the *Chassidic* period. Adding to the confusion were the terms the earlier *Sabbatians* used to describe themselves, namely, ‘*Maaminim*’ (*Believers*) and even ‘*Chassidim*.’ The *Sabbatians* perpetuated the idea that they were the true defenders of the Jewish faith and that all other Jews were “*Kofrim*” (*Deniers*). In religious communities where virtue signalling and cohesion within sanctioned circles of association are important, nomenclature and labels are no small matter. Complicating matters further was the later evolution of *Sabbatianism* into the even more extreme form of *Frankism* under Jacob Frank (1726-1791) which also coincided with the rise of *Chassidim*.

⁶⁹ Square brackets are mine.

Coincidentally or otherwise, it is significant that regions such as eastern Galicia and Podolia, which were strongholds of *Sabbatianism*, “and remained under its influence for a comparatively long time” (Scholem 1941a:303), were the very same areas in which *Chassidism* began to emerge. Neither must one forget that those who composed and circulated the major *Sabbatian* teachings were not from an estranged or marginal element of Jewish society, but:

“[m]ost of the believers who disseminated Sabbatianism were rabbis and kabbalists” (Elior 2012:90).

All this gives some indication of the complicated social and spiritual setting in which *Sabbatianism* had spread and *Chassidism* was to be birthed. This study, with the benefit of more recent research, aims to penetrate this murky, under-reported and censored world and reveal ties long hidden and forgotten.

2.3.5 Synthesis

Although the early, pre-1666 *Sabbatian* movement had probably attracted the majority of Jews and rabbis to the messianic cause, it was specifically the crisis phase after the apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi in 1666 that refined, if not defined, the theology of the *Sabbatian* movement. That theology could only have been a deeply mystical doctrine as it was required to defend the undefendable act of messianic apostasy. That doctrine would have resonated neatly with the many *Marranos* who had been exiled eastwards and were very familiar with the dualism of living in two religions simultaneously. For them, as well as other mystical European Jews, Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy may not have appeared all that outrageous. Despite the widespread, severe and targeted censorship that *Sabbatian* mystical ideology later underwent, the movement continued to exert its influence. The question now becomes one of ascertaining just how far that influence was able to penetrate. The next major historical movement was *Chassidism* and it is to the emergence of the *Chassidic* movement that we now direct our attention.

2.4 Emergence of the *Chassidic* movement

2.4.1 Introduction

No one can doubt the magnificence of many of the teachings of the *Chassidic* movement. The ideology, theology and existentialism of its thought have resonated,

not only with its fervent followers but also with ordinary people, Jews and non-Jews alike. The *Chassidic* movement was founded by R. Yisrael ben Eliezer Baal Shem Tov (1690/⁷⁰1698/1700-1760), known by the acronym for **Baal Shem Tov**, as the **Besht**. The movement emerged in Podolia, Volhynia, and eastern Galicia, which were historical regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and today form part of western Ukraine. Rachel Elijah (2012:85) explains that at around 1740, the Baal Shem Tov was invited to the Podolian town of Medzebuzh (Międzybórz) to serve as a *Doctor Kabbalista*, or mystical and herbal healer as many of the *Baalei Shem* (*Wonder-Workers*) were known. We shall now outline the general ethos and culture of these travelling healers and medicine men.

2.4.2 A glimpse into the world of the *Baalei Shem*

From around the sixteenth century, the itinerant Jewish magical, theurgical and traditional healers were known as *Baalei Shem* (plural of *Baal Shem*). While they were considered a second-rate level of the rabbinate, many of them were quite influential. Perhaps the most important document to shed light on the inner and rather secretive world of the *Baalei Shem*, is a manuscript discovered in 1993 by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, whilst he was the senior librarian at the Vernadsky Library in Kiev (Kyiv). This unusual manuscript, entitled *Sefer haCheshek* has the last date referenced as 1740 which coincides perfectly with the time of R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov. The author's name is R. Hillel Baal Shem and from his manuscript, it is evident that he operated at exactly the same time, and in the same vicinity, as the famous Baal Shem Tov. When Moshe Rosman was made aware of the find, he encouraged Petrovsky-Shtern to write about his discovery because he considered this unusual work to be:

"the most extensive exposition of ba'al shem techniques and experiences that I know of" (Rosman 1996:217-218).

The areas of expertise R. Hillel Baal Shem encompassed, included:

"how to use holy names (shemot ha-kedushah) and impure names (shemot ha-tum'ah) in order to stop epidemics...treat a sick child...prevent epilepsy, dizziness, craziness, headache, and night

⁷⁰ This early date has been proposed by Heschel (1974:3).

fear...treat fever, wounds, pollution, diarrhea, insomnia and bad smell from the mouth...expel evil forces from the house... cure a barren woman...regulate menstruation...and heart beating...prevent evil forces from harming a newly born child...keep healthy dietary laws...stop girls' hair from growing...protect an individual and his habitat from an evil eye, thieves, fire, bandits, Lilith; identify a thief through talking to a homunculus⁷¹ in a bottle..." (Petrovsky-Shtern 2004:221).

What immediately strikes one is that in this case not only are the '*holy names*' used to heal, but the '*impure names*' are also invoked for the same purpose. This particular *Baal Shem*, R. Hillel, was evidently not only a *Baal Shem Tov* (*Master of the Good Name*) – a healer who used the names of '*good*' spiritual entities but he was also a *Baal Shem Ra* (*Master of the Evil Name*), a practitioner who used the names of '*evil*' spiritual entities. R. Hillel Baal Shem Ra used Yiddish punctuated with Slavicisms (Polish and Ukrainian), including Polish-Ukrainian incantations such as the following:

"*Zive boze, pomozni, pomohi ten ohon ohniski i otruski, od silaiu, od glovi, ochi i od beloho kosti, od chervoni krev* = Living God, [my Helper], help [to take out] that poisoning fire of fires, out of [his/her] strength, out of [his/her] head, out of [his/her] eyes and white bones" (Petrovsky-Shtern 2004:222 n. 23).

Melancholy or depression was a common problem and he refers to it as *Marah Shechora* (*Black Bile*). The remedy was often an enema of milk and sugar. He also said that he had learned how to protect a person against evil spirits from R. Yitzchak Fortis, and he claimed to have learned how to save someone who had consumed poison (*Sam Mavet*) from a certain Dr Zalnick.

But essentially, R. Hillel was a *Kabbalist*. He recommended the recitation of *Tikun Leil Shabbat* (a midnight pietist liturgy to be recited on the Sabbath) which originated with the *Lurianic Kabbalists*. R. Hillel said he had learned this liturgy from

⁷¹ A homunculus is usually defined as a representation of a small human being, originally depicted as small statues made out of clay, or sometimes produced, supposedly, by an alchemist - but I'm not sure what it means in this context.

his “*friends in Venice and Prague*,” and he encouraged others to recite it. Yet, unlike his frequent and liberal references to his medical friends and teachers, he does not – for some reason – mention the names of his *Kabbalistic* friends and mystical teachers. He claims to have studied manuscripts by a certain Efraim, who was a *Magid Mesharim* (*preacher of righteousness*) from Vissa (Bessarabia) but he tells us no more about his identity.

“This is yet another mysterious pattern of Hillel's writings. It appears as if he wanted to conceal their names. The 1720s were the years of a fierce battle against crypto-sabbateans from Altona to Prague and Zolkiew. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, sometimes it was not feasible to draw the line separating regular kabbalists from crypto-sabbateans” (Petrovsky-Shtern 2004:224).

It seems probable, therefore, that his *Kabbalistic* teachers may have been secret *Sabbatians* and that he was “*hiding his personal relations with those who balanced on the brink of heresy*” (Petrovsky-Shtern 2004:224).

Considering his coyness over who his mystical teachers were, and considering the climate and culture of *Baalei Shem* at that time, it is most likely that R. Hillel was indeed a secret *Sabbatian*. Being a *Baal Shem Ra* – as opposed to an exclusive *Baal Shem Tov* – with his adeptness at using the ‘energies’ from the ‘other side’ suggests to me that he bore the hallmark of *Sabbatianism*. R. Hillel's embracing of the ‘evil side’ may have been part of the wider *Sabbatian* notion of sin for the sake of redemption, where it is believed one must first enter the sin, or the realm of evil, to elevate it back to holiness. This antinomian concept is also known as *Aveira Lishema* (*Holy Sin*) (see section 2.2.3).

The great ‘*Sabbatian* hunter,’ R. Yakov Emden, had identified most of these questionable *Baalei Shem* as *Sabbatians* (R. Yakov Emden, *Sefer Hitabkut*, 1762:28; *Torat haKenaot* 1845:118-119). Gershom Scholem (1994:110-111) brings evidence thereof, but Gershon Hundert (2006:121-122) takes an intermediate view that some *Baalei Shem* were *Sabbatians* while others were not.

During the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, it was a common phenomenon to find Jewish wanderers, healers and fundraisers all over Eastern Europe. These itinerant personalities included *Sabbatian* and *Chassidic*

preachers known as *Mochichim* (*Rebukers*). Petrovsky-Shtern (2004:226) makes the important point that:

“practical Kabbalah had already become part and parcel of general Jewish culture - even prominent rabbis were engaged in it, to say nothing of itinerant healers, well-established doctors, and ba'alei shem.”

In religious leadership, a point is reached when one's authority has to be established in order to be effective. The *Baalei Shem*, it seems, had to deal with some considerable competition from their colleagues, and one of the ways of establishing one-upmanship was to perform an exorcism. Yoram Bilu (2003:64) explains that exorcisms were a common means of demonstrating authority:

"The validation of the moral ascendancy of religious leaders through the dybbuk [evil spirit] idiom contributed to social control...The exorcistic ritual constituted a conservative mechanism that facilitated the perpetuation of the traditional status hierarchy in the community."⁷²

One notices that Bilu refers to techniques like exorcism as “a *conservative mechanism*,” which gives us a window into nature of general Jewish society in those days. R. Hillel attempted to establish his authority and this is how he describes his accomplishing a successful exorcism:

“I pronounced one great oath and one great petition in the presence of ten appropriate people and the Torah scrolls. Thursday, Elul, 5493 [1733], the spirit left the body of that woman through the little toe of her left leg from under her little nail so that some blood came out of her toe. After that she began seeing a little bit and she started going to the synagogue, to the cemetery, and to all other places as she found fit. However, she could not see at all through the only eye by

⁷² Square brackets are mine.

which the spirit had entered her body” (R. Hillel Baal Shem, *Sefer haCheshek*, 127a).

R. Hillel was probably basing himself on the *Lurianic* ideology of R. Chaim Vital, who writes in his *Shaar Ruach haKodesh* in the name of his teacher, R. Yitzchak Luria (the *Ari*), that *Kabbalistic* practitioners should use the toe as the exit point for the evil spirit so that it doesn’t do damage to the rest of the body.

On a more mundane level, R. Hillel complains that there is too much competition from other *Baalei Shem*, whom he refers to as *Chassidim shakranim*, or *false Chassidim*.⁷³ He claims they only do this work for the money and sometimes perform bogus miracles. They even falsify their documents of endorsement. He insisted that these *Baalei Shem* give sincere practitioners like him, a bad name.

As additional possible evidence of *Sabbatian* connections to these theurgical healers, R. Hillel describes an incident when one of these questionable *Baalei Shem* took a perfectly *kosher* and valid *Sefer Torah* (*Torah Scroll*), belonging to “the great *hasid* and *Kabbalist* Yosef Hols, of blessed memory” (*Sefer haCheshek* 94b), and intentionally made a ‘mistake’ in it to render it invalid. R. Hillel does not inform us exactly as to the nature of the ‘mistake,’ but considering the dominant *Sabbatian* culture of the times:

“The followers of Sabbatai Tsevi...were known to insert the name of the pseudo-Messiah instead of the tetragrammaton [G-d’s name] into sifrei STAM - phylacteries, mezuzas, and Torah scrolls” (Petrovsky-Shtern 2004:233).

On several occasions, R. Hillel mentions that he is “repenting.” Petrovsky-Shtern (2004:233) suggests that he was repenting for his association with *Sabbatianism*. To bolster this hypothesis, he explains that a certain important *Baal Shem* from Posen, R. Naftali haCohen Katz, was said to have met the ‘Angel of Death’ who masqueraded as a simple beggar. This incident took place just before R. Naftali haCohen Katz journeyed to the Holy Land. In Hebrew, the ‘Angel of Death’ is *Malach haMavet*. This may have been a veiled reference to the infamous *Sabbatian* leader R. Chaim Malach

⁷³ One wonders whether the use of the expression “*false Chassidim*” isn’t a veiled reference to secret *Sabbatians*? *Sabbatians* also referred to themselves as *Chassidim* (see section 2.3.4).

against whom so many bans of ex-communication were directed (see section 3.1.3). The play on the words *Malach haMavet* and *Chaim Malach* makes it a devious insult to the *Sabbatian* leader, R. *Chaim Malach* (Petrovsky-Shtern 2004:246).

R. Naftali haCohen Katz, who gave his approbation to a *Sabbatian* work was a known *Baal Shem* (see section 4.5). In 1711 he became a victim of a house fire but he did not cry for assistance because he wanted to test the efficacy of his amulets, especially one in the shape of a *stag* or *Tzvi*.⁷⁴ As a result:

“The Jewish quarter of Frankfurt was entirely destroyed. Naphtali Katz was imprisoned and had to leave the city” (Baumgarten 2009:26 n.90).

R. Hillel believed that demons are everywhere. They multiply better and faster than humans (*Sefer haCheshek* 83b). They cannot be combated by any holy items including Scrolls of the Torah (*Sefer haCheshek* 94b). Great rabbis can’t help either, and no head of a *Beit Din* (*Jewish Ecclesiastical Court*) or *Rosh Yeshiva* (*Dean of a Talmud Academy*) nor the studying of Torah by great scholars (*Sefer haCheshek* 107a). Only special secret evil names – which R. Hillel claimed he knew – can mitigate against evil (*Sefer haCheshek* 341b). Because he was obsessed with the side of evil, he probably deviated more than some of the other *Baalei Shem*, hence his designation, *Baal Shem Ra*. Nevertheless, he affords us a glimpse into the realia – as opposed to hagiographical accounts – of the world of the *Baalei Shem* in the same period, setting and location as R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov.

2.4.2.1 Synthesis

Following a brief presentation of the world and culture of *Baalei Shem*, including their not-uncommon brushings with *Sabbatianism*, we proceed with a short general survey of, and background to, the *Chassidic* movement.

2.4.3 Background to the *Chassidic* movement

The late seventeenth century brought difficult times for the Jews both internally and externally. Within the Jewish community – although Shabbatai Tzvi had passed away in 1676 – his movement continued to flourish and the *Sabbatian* doctrine

⁷⁴ Perhaps a reference to Shabbatai Tzvi.

continued to expand (see section 2.3). The entire region was saturated with secret *Sabbatians* who:

“adhered to the messianic-Sabbatical hopes...while living outwardly according to the traditional way” (Elior 2012:87).

This made it very difficult to distinguish *Sabbatians* from regular observant Jews. Externally, there was pressure from the Polish Catholic Church. It was challenged by the Protestant Reformation and needed to secure its tenure in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Amongst other measures, it adopted a policy of:

“reinstating medieval anti-Semitic constraints including the coerced conversion of Jews to Catholicism, the abduction of Jewish children in order to baptize them and raise them as Christians, false accusations against Jews in all economic, social and religious dimensions, the publication and dissemination of anti-Semitic literature, and the frequent orchestration of murderous blood libels” (Elior 2012:88).

According to Jacek Wijaczka (2003:208-209), during the Early Modern Era, “89 *ritual murder accusations and trials took place in Poland*.” The Polish historian Janusz Tazbir (1998:240) similarly notes that:

“In the 18th century, Poland led the statistics of ritual murder trials.”

Around the period of the Baal Shem Tov, there were thirty-five (Elior 2012:85) recorded blood libels which were more than at any other period of Jewish history, and:

“[t]he first mystical testimony on the public activity of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov has to do with the blood libels in the 1740s and ‘50s” (Elior 2012:88).

The Baal Shem Tov’s parents had experienced the Khmelnytsky pogroms and were advanced in years when their son was born. They soon passed away and the young boy was orphaned early in his life. As a result, he grew up distanced from the Jewish community and he “*maintained that he had never studied in any school and had no formal teacher*” (Elior 2012:91). In any case, most of the schools and synagogues in Ukraine had been destroyed during the uprisings.

He claimed his teacher was the heavenly Achiya haShiloni mentioned in I Kings (11: 29–30). During the reign of King Solomon, Achiya was a Levite prophet from Shiloh and he foretold Yeravam (Jeroboam) of the split in the kingdom and that he was destined to become the first king of the Northern Kingdom with its ten tribes. According to a tradition in the *Talmud*,⁷⁵ seven righteous people lived extremely long lives and cumulatively spanned the entirety of humanity, with the prophet Elijah currently filling this position. Achiya haShiloni was the sixth in this line of extraordinary individuals and is said to have seen Amram the father of Moses. By claiming Achiya haShiloni as his teacher, the Baal Shem Tov is clearly establishing his authority and authenticity, even while admitting that he had no official schooling in rabbinics.

The Baal Shem Tov left no books or writings other than some letters. Although he was inspired by earlier mysticism, including *Lurianic Kabbalah* (and arguably *Sabbatian Kabbalah*), many of his teachings were personal mystical experiences sometimes based on his dreams. Nevertheless, he managed to attract some highly respected rabbinic followers like R. Yakov Yosef of Polonnoye (1704–1782) who had served in authoritative positions in Podolia, and in 1780, published the very first book on *Chassidut*, in Koretz, entitled *Sefer Toldot Yakov Yosef*. This book remains an important source for the teachings of his Master. Another respected rabbi from Volhynia, R. Dovber of Mezeritch, also known as the *Magid* (*Preacher*) of Mezeritch, joined the Baal Shem Tov and later became his successor. As the movement grew, it spread from Podolia to Volhynia (where the *Magid of Mezeritch* was active), then to Galicia (through R. Elimelech of Lishensk) and from there on to Poland (Heschel 1974:8).

In studying *Chassidic* history, it is very difficult to distinguish between fact and fancy:

“In the minds of his Hasidic followers in the 18th and 19th centuries, the reputation of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov soared beyond the bounds of

⁷⁵ b. *Bava Batra* 121b: “Methuselah saw Adam in his lifetime; Shem saw Methuselah; Jacob saw Shem; Amram saw Jacob; Ahijah the Shilonite saw Amram; Elijah saw Ahijah the Shilonite; and Elijah is still alive” (William Davidson Edition, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem. 2019). Although six individuals are mentioned in this extract, the number seven would include Adam.

historical reality and acquired mythological status unconstrained by time, place, written record, or biographical evidence” (Elior 2012:92).

In this study, we focus on research, history, ideology, cross-over personalities and textual evidence that pierce beneath the spiritually glossy facade and try to find associations that are often overlooked by hagiography and the popular depictions of *Chassidic* lore.

Many of the Baal Shem Tov’s popularised spiritual teachings are considered universal and appealing in terms of how accessible God and humankind are to each other.⁷⁶ God is constantly present equally and everywhere and all people can serve God in their own way and with whatever means at their disposal. The Baal Shem Tov is known as:

“a mystic who was interested in blurring or obscuring the borders between the spiritual and the material dimensions of existence as well as in transcending the borders between the divine presence and human consciousness” (Elior 2012:94).

Theologically, the early *Chassidic* movement was an intense reshaping, if not the abandonment, of hitherto clear distinctions between God and humankind. With the Baal Shem Tov, there can be no existence at all outside of the divine entity as everything is considered part of the divine.

Aryeh Kaplan adopts a rather pragmatic explanation for the rise of the *Chassidic* movement. *Kabbalah* had failed to meet the needs of the hour because it had produced a false Messiah. Rationalism and philosophy had failed too, because they resulted in the stirrings of what was to become the Enlightenment movement. The centrist and conservative rabbinic leadership had also failed because it tightened the strictures of ritual observances that *Sabbatianism* had loosened. It countered the joy, ecstasy and apparent nihilistic abandonment of *Sabbatianism* and *Frankism*, with seriousness and a weighty focus on *Talmudic* texts and rabbinic law. This group later

⁷⁶ Although Elior (2012:105) does qualify the ‘universalism’ by making the point that these ideas “concerning the encompassing presence of God...entailed a social revolution relating to the equal accessibility of all male members of the Jewish community to the mystical tradition...” For traces of a later feminine revolution within *Chabad Chassidic* thought see Rapoport-Albert (2013:435-473).

developed into the *Mitnagdic* camp. Against all these forces, the Baal Shem Tov offered a unique solution:

“Neither Kabbalah nor philosophy, but experience is the proper way to approach God...If there are contradictions [between the approaches of *Kabbalah*, philosophy and rabbinic strictures], so be it – all of life is filled with conflict” (Kaplan 1984:2-3).⁷⁷

Chassidism, on this view, was all about experientialism. Kaplan embodies the approach most often put forward by those within the *Chassidic* movement itself. On a pragmatic level, I think this is correct. However, *Chassidism* – by its own admission and in its own tradition – also claimed to have relied on a previous ‘hidden’ mystical literature that was conveyed to the Baal Shem Tov by Achiya haShimoni and Adam Baal Shem. It certainly went on to produce a vast and veritable body of *Chassidut*, as its literature is known. Chassidism’s references to, and reliance on, a previous ‘hidden’ literature, as well as the prolific development of its own literature, seems to preclude the emphasis on mere experientialism.

Nonetheless, Kaplan (1984:1) is still adamant that the effects of *Sabbatianism* were real, far-reaching and influenced not just the *Chassidic* movement but all aspects of Jewry following in its aftermath:

“The most important single influence upon the Jewish community of that period had been the rise of Shabbetai Tzvi.”

The Baal Shem Tov introduced twelve concepts to clarify his approach (and many of these were indeed experiential).⁷⁸ Some of these concepts were taken from previous mysticism and others were original (Elior 2012:95-101).

⁷⁷ Square brackets are mine.

⁷⁸ The twelve concepts are: *Deveikut* (attachment to God), Thought (the mind can contain limitless conceptions of the infinite), Letters (the power of the letters and words of the Hebrew language), *Bitul haYesh* (nullification of being), *Nefesh Elohim* (divine soul), *Hafshatat haGashmiyut* (divestment of corporeality), *Hishtavut* (indifference), *Hitbonenut* (contemplation and meditation), *Avodah beGashmiyut* (worship through corporeality and physicality), *Olam hadibur medaber b’adam* (every human being can become a vessel for the divine voice), *Kavanot* (intent) and *Yichudim* (mystical restorative unifications), *Gadlut* (expansiveness) and *Katnut* (submission to the constraints of reality) (Elior 2012:14-22). Idel (2002:150-152) includes other concepts like *Hitbodedut* (solitude) and *Hamshacha* (drawing down of holiness).

However, Etkes (1996:460) brings evidence from other scholars and texts that the Baal Shem Tov:

“operated within the exclusive framework of traditional mystical piety which was always intended for a few elect individuals.”

According to Etkes, the Baal Shem Tov did not innovate new or original teachings at all. Instead, he was a traditional *Kabbalist* and did not intend to spread mysticism to the masses.

Regardless of the debate over the degree of originality in the Baal Shem Tov's teachings, it soon became clear that his various mystical regimens which included the unification between humans and God, the struggle between exile and redemption, the nullification of the self and other such lofty mystical ideas, were becoming too overbearing for the general populace. To help the average person achieve these demanding spiritual ends, the need arose for a *Tzadik* (*righteous person*) to act as a mentor or assistant, if not an outright intercessor.

“The Hassidic tsadik is a charismatic leader whose legitimacy had been conferred by higher worlds” (Elior 2012:105).

The spiritual leadership of the *Tzadik* was not only unelected (by humans) but revolutionary considering that Jewish communal leadership in the recent past had been through elected officials. The doctrine of the *Tzadik* was first introduced by the followers of the *Magid of Mezeritch* in the late 1760s, and R. Yakov Yosef of Polonnoye developed it further from the 1780s. The *Tzadikim* were generally charismatic and their main function was to serve as a conduit for God to manifest in reality and for the followers or *Chassidim* to merge with the divine. The purpose of the *Chassid* was to become nullified to the *Tzadik* to affect this two-way fusion.

Because this new system of *Chassidism* had attracted vast numbers of adherents, between 1772 and 1815 the *Mitnagdim* or opponents began to issue various bans of ex-communication against the *Chassidim*. Significantly, the same community of conservative mainstream rabbis who had fought to ex-communicate the *Sabbatians* were now excommunicating the *Chassidim* – and for what they feared were the same reasons. The *Mitnagdim* considered themselves to be the intellectual and traditional elite, and they condemned the *Chassidim* for their:

“rejection of prevailing Ashkenazi tradition in ritual; rejection of prevailing Ashkenazi tradition in religious norms; rejection of prevailing Ashkenazi spiritual priorities; contempt for the Torah and its scholars; and Sabbatian heresy” (Elior 2012:107).

The *Chassidim* countered the first three accusations by claiming to follow the *Kabbalistic* path rather than *Ashkenazi* customs and completely denied the last two charges of contempt for Torah study and engagement with *Sabbatianism*.

2.4.3.1 Synthesis

Following this broad outline of the rise of the Baal Shem Tov and the *Chassidic* teachings, we proceed to examine in greater detail the scholarship on the causes, influences and intentions of the *Chassidic* movement.

2.5 Scholarship on causes, influences and intentions of *Chassidism*

It is informative, if not surprising, to see the vast array of dissenting views and opinions on how and why the *Chassidic* movement emerged. Many of the accepted historical and traditional views are severely debated and challenged in the overview that follows.

2.5.1 Rachel Elior: A) *Chassidism* as response to tragedy

As the seventeenth century fused with the eighteenth century, the two “*major mystical-messianic-charismatic movements*,” as Rachel Elior (2012:85) tellingly describes them, *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, emerged relatively simultaneously. The Khmelnytsky persecutions were still fresh in the minds of the people who had first-hand experience of its horrors. According to Elior, *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* were both responses to the massacres, and both movements were informal as they did not seek permission from the recognised rabbinic authorities.

Israel Halpern (1969:55-60) points out that around this time, less than one per cent of the Jewish population was eligible to vote for its communal and rabbinic leadership. This was because only the wealthy, who paid taxes, were permitted to vote. One can understand how, in a non-representative societal environment like this, charismatic and ground-up movements could find fertile soil. They offered social elevation and spiritual status to the average individual. It seems, therefore, quite

feasible to assume that both movements arose in response to similar concerns of persecution under Khmelnytsky from without, and societal neglect from within.

Although chronologically, *Sabbatianism* preceded *Chassidism*, Elior maintains that both movements were “*spiritual responses to the tragic circumstances*” of the Khmelnytsky massacres, also known as the Cossack–Polish War. While these massacres are often associated with the date 1648 when they began, it must be remembered that they continued for about twenty years up to 1668. This was already two years after Shabbatai Tzvi had officially been discredited and branded as a false Messiah when he converted to Islam in 1666. It was also just thirty (or thirty-two, or perhaps only twenty-two)⁷⁹ years before the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of the *Chassidic* movement) was born.

Yet even after 1668, attacks against Jews continued. More than one hundred thousand Jews were killed by the Cossacks between 1646 and 1768 in Ukraine, and Jews were subjected to pogroms in areas where the Polish army had withdrawn.⁸⁰ The Greek-Orthodox Ukrainian serfs rebelled against the Polish Catholics and the Jews were caught up in the attacks as they often served as administrators for the Polish nobility. The Cossacks also attacked the Roman Catholic clergy and the civilian population, resulting in revenge attacks and “*savage reprisals*” by Prince Jeremi Wiśniowiecki (Davies 2005:351).

Documentary evidence spanning a century and a half between 1650 and the end of the eighteenth century shows how Jews were emotionally devastated and similarly intent on revenge (see section 2.5.1.1). Included in this body of literature is also a strong expression of messianic hope (Elior 2012:86). The effects and dramatic consequences of the Khmelnytsky massacres are not lost on Joseph Citron (n.d.:32-33), Jacob Barnai (1995:175) or Moshe Rosman (1982:6) either. Davies (2005:352) speaks of “[t]he strains of incessant war” which “*caused internal inflammations.*” Some of these “*inflammations*” are also evident in the *Kabbalistic* literature produced during that time.

⁷⁹ The year of the Baal Shem Tov’s birth is alternately given as 1698, 1700 and Heschel (1974:3) gives it as early as around 1690.

⁸⁰ According to Davies (2005:353) “*The total number of Jewish casualties in the period 1648-56 has been put at 56,000; the over-all decrease in the Jewish community through death, flight, and destitution approached 100,000.*”

In keeping with her notion of the importance of the massacres, Elio tends to undermine (my argument concerning) the significance of possible *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement. Elio is of the view that since *Sabbatianism* and *Frankism* preceded *Chassidism* chronologically, the mainstream and conservative rabbinic authorities simply regarded *Chassidism* as being similarly and equally antinomian as those two earlier movements. She argues that the rabbinic authorities did not attempt to prudently seek or allow for possible traditional mystical roots and influences on the *Chassidic* movement (such as those emanating from *Lurianic Kabbalah*, for example) but rather fanned the fears that their rabbinic authority was being corroded and destabilised by *Chassidism*, which they perceived to be an equal enemy with *Sabbatianism*. At that time, as mentioned previously (see section 1.3), the rabbinate had to contend with four groups that simultaneously threatened its authority, and each of these groups called themselves “*Chassidim*.”⁸¹ Elio thus maintains that in the eyes of a threatened rabbinate:

“all pietistic spiritualism was suspected of being antinomian, and...to hold heretical beliefs and do strange deeds” (Elio 1995:236).

However, Elio suggests that internally, the *Chassidim*:

“viewed themselves as continuing the holy Kabbalistic tradition and as profound innovators under its inspiration and within its confines” (Elio 1995:242).

Elio continues with the corollary that *Sabbatianism*, on the other hand, although based on that same *Kabbalistic* tradition, had made antinomian use of those very same roots. In this view, *Sabbatianism* is *not* a major influence on the *Chassidic* movement because both drew primarily from early *Kabbalistic* traditions, and both were responses to the persecutions.

2.5.1.1 Support for Elio’s notion of response to tragedy

Elio’s view that the Khmelnytsky massacres were a primary factor that shaped the future spiritual ideologies of both *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, cannot be minimised. Although this study takes a different view, the effects of the persecutions

⁸¹ The *Sabbatians*, *Frankists*, the followers of the Baal Shem Tov and the followers of R. Natan Adler of Frankfurt all referred to themselves as “*Chassidim*.”

cannot be minimised, and support for her view can be found in an extreme but little-known example (which Elior does not reference) of the need for revenge, which is found in the writings of the *Sabbatian* rabbi, R. Heshil Tzoref (see section 4.7). I bring this example to try and show how although revenge for the persecutions was very real in the thought of R. Heshil Tzoref, nevertheless, his main motivation was to spread *Sabbatianism* and he was an important, if not vital, bridge between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*.

Based on the Hebrew alphanumeric system where each Hebrew letter carries a numerical value,⁸² the following calculations will help us understand how numerology was used to great effect in *Sabbatian Kabbalah*. *Sabbatians* were adept at linking the numerical values of certain Hebrew words and dates to biblical verses and *Kabbalistic* concepts, and then relating them directly to historical events playing out in ‘real-time.’

Yehuda Liebes⁸³ (2007:7-8) shows how R. Heshil Tzoref had three distinct periods of spiritual awakening and increased mystical activity. These occurred during the years 1648 (corresponding to the Hebrew calendar date [5]408⁸⁴ = ת"ח = 408, the beginning of the Khmelnytsky pogroms); 1666 (corresponding to [5]426 = תכ"ו = 426, the year Shabbatai Tzvi apostatised to Islam) and; 1688 (corresponding to [5]448 = תמ"ח = 448, a seemingly random date other than being exactly forty years after 1648). These three dates and phases are mystically described and interpreted as follows:

- 1) R. Heshil Tzoref found a ‘hint’ to the Khmelnytsky pogroms in the Hebrew year ת"ח (408=1648) which he linked to the biblical phrase דר דר מלחמה ליהוה בעמלק (4+200+4+200=408) which is found at the end of the verse מלחמה ליהוה בעמלק, מדר דר, “God will be at war with Amalek in every generation” (Exodus 17:16). Thus, in 1648 (408) Amalek (represented by Khmelnytsky) is identified as the evil entity of the generation, and those who fight Khmelnytsky wage God’s war.

⁸² Thus *Alef* = 1, *Bet* = 2, *Gimel* = three, and so forth.

⁸³ Yehuda Liebes is one of the few scholars who postulates a direct link between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* (Etkes 1996:459), a view to which I subscribe as well.

⁸⁴ The year 1648 in the Gregorian calendar corresponds to the Hebrew year ת"ח which is 408. The Hebrew year is technically ה'ת"ח, 5408, but the millennium letter, in this case ה, or numeral 5, is often omitted from date calculations.

2) In 1666 (426)⁸⁵ the previous but incomplete biblical representation of דר דר is conceptualised as expanding to the fuller דור ודור with the addition of three extra *vavim* (letter vavs, each of which has a numerical value of 6) which now makes 426 (408 + 6 + 6 + 6 = 426).⁸⁶ The spiritual battle that was started in 1648 (408) is, now intensified (with the three extra vavs) during the year 1666 (426). This means that despite the apostasy of the Messiah in 1666, Shabbatai Tzvi's followers now have to dig deeply to 'understand' the spiritual necessity for the 'messianic betrayal,' because the heat of the battle against evil has just intensified. This explains the conversion of a Jewish Messiah to Islam as part of the penetratingly extenuating but necessary circumstances. This also ties in with the expansion of the *Sabbatian* doctrine and its literature in the post-apostasy period (see section 2.3).

3) In 1688 – forty years after 1648 (perhaps corresponding to the biblical delay between the exodus and the promised entry to the land) – God's final retribution and victory were to have taken place. God was going to mete out revenge on Edom which came to represent Christianity. The year 1688 (448) was selected for the following reason: The biblical Esau (representing Edom=Christendom)⁸⁷ was born while Jacob (representing the Jewish people) was clutching at his heel. The biblical expression וידו אחזת בעקב עשו in the verse, "And *his [Jacob's] hand was clutching* (the heel of Esau)" (Genesis 25:26), has a numerical value of 448.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ I notice that the Hebrew year 426 (1666) is eighteen years after 408 (1648). The number eighteen, or חי, which means "life," is a very well-known, obvious and recognisable Jewish symbol of restoration. Perhaps this, amongst other reasons, was why Shabbatai Tzvi declared 1666 to be the apocalyptic year, the year of restoration and rebirth after the horrors beginning in 1648. Ironically, his apostasy took place in that very year.

⁸⁶ This calculation is made despite the fact that the fuller version (דר can also be spelt as דור) is not found in the biblical text.

⁸⁷ See "עשו אבי אדם בְּהַר שֵׁעִיר," Esau the ancestor of Edom, in the hills of Seir," Genesis 36:9.

⁸⁸ This calculation assumes a 'full' spelling with an extra vav in the word אחזת, although the Torah text has it written without the vav, as אחזת. Both the numerical extrapolations from דר דר, דור ודור, and אחזת to אחזת involve the inclusion of extra vavs.

In this threefold mystical and numerological conceptualisation by R. Heshil Tzoref, the evil Amalek/Khmelnysky is *identified* in 1648 (408) and the scheme to dethrone that evil begins. The battle *intensifies* in 1666 (426) with the paradox of the Jewish Messiah's apostasy to Islam (a necessary *Sabbatian Kabbalistic* requirement known as "*yeridah tzorech aliya*," to enter forbidden regions to elevate them). The process is completed by the "*clutching the heel*" of, or *vengeance* against, Esau/Christianity in 1688 (448).

R. Heshil Tzoref's elaborate system of mysticism includes Esau's grandson, Tsefo (צפו=176), who corresponds in numerology to Polin (Poland) (פולין=176). Samael is the guardian of both Esau and Tsefo, which means Samael is also the guardian of Poland, hence Poland represents the Christian Kingdom of Edom. This construct is strengthened by the similarity between Tsefo (צפו) and North (צפון). North (צפון=226) is then connected to Polin-Lita (Poland and Lithuania) (פולין ליטא=226). Then R. Heshil Tzoref relates all this to a verse from Jeremiah (1:14) מִצָּפוֹן תִּפְתָּח הָרָעָה, "*out of the north shall evil break forth*," and R. Heshil Tzoref explains that "*when the messianic redemption arrives, it will first manifest in the north, which is, Poland-Lithuania*."

It could be said that, over a period of forty years, R. Heshil Tzoref believed he could reframe, if not cosmically realign, the three forces of Amalek (1648), Islam (1666) and Christianity (1688), thus preparing for final messianic era. And in his mystical mind, all these stages are presented as being supported by biblical verses.

In a shocking and brutal *Sabbatian* mystical interpretation, the *vengeance* of 1688 (against Christianity) is described in sexual terms – but violently so, as assaulting a virgin – because the year 1688 (448), the last of the three stages, has the same numerical value as הבתולה (=448=*the virgin*). Reading between the lines and considering the appetite for revenge for the blood libels and massacres against Jews, this may be referring to a reprisal attack to right the horrors of 1648 and it may have targeted a Christian virgin, perhaps a veiled reference to Mary. It is difficult to sift the facts from the innuendos, but Liebes writes:

"It seems to me that this matter was not written about before the event, but was [instead] described as prophecy after the fact (vaticinium ex

eventu) [and referred to] an event that had already occurred on history's stage, and in the lifetime of R. Heshil. It is possible that the redemption [to be brought about] by R. Heshil was bound up with engaging with a virgin of flesh and blood, similar to what we find with many other messianic characters throughout history. It seems that this sexual encounter remained within the memory of the Chassidim⁸⁹ of R. Heshil for the next generations, and the words of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov [a follower of the Vilna Gaon, representing the opposition or *Mitnagdic* camp opposing *Chassidism*] hint at this [encounter as well]⁹⁰ (Liebes 2007: 8)⁹¹

It is very difficult to know how exactly to interpret this apparent and abhorrent event and identify the perpetrator and the victim. But it is clear that the logic of *restorative consequence* and *cathartic vengeance*, in one form or another, features in the *Sabbatian* mysticism of R. Heshil Tzoref. This must have been fuelled all the more by a society overcome by the fear of pogroms, persecuted by a proliferation of blood libels and seeking revenge against those Christians – or more accurately, the “*Bishops of the Catholic Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*” (Elior 2012:102) – who considered Jew to be “*God-killers*.”

With the irony that Catholic clergy and civilians themselves were also subject to attacks by the Cossacks, and the corresponding reprisals by the Catholics against the Cossacks, it is no wonder that this ecclesiastical chaos in Poland has been described as “*God's playground*” (Davies 2005). To add to the ironies and chaos of the time, “*Khmyel'nitskiy*” was later remembered (in Soviet Russia) as “*a Moses who led his people's exodus from Polish bondage towards the great Russian homeland*” (Davies 2005:353).

According to Janusz Tazbir, a foremost Polish historian specializing in the culture and religion of Poland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

⁸⁹ Here, the term *Chassidim* is used in its broader context referring to ‘followers’ in general as R. Heshil Tzoref (1633-1699) pre-dates the *Chassidim* of the Baal Shem Tov (1698/1700-1760). *Sabbatians*, as mentioned, also referred to themselves as *Chassidim*.

⁹⁰ Without going into the details of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov here, suffice it to say that there is a further allusion to this ‘event’ in at least one other independent source as well (for more on R. Menachem Mendel on Shklov, see section 6.4).

⁹¹ Translation is mine.

“The indignation at the ‘nation of God-killers’ was inflamed by the belief that the Jews remained blind to the splendor of the true faith instead of doing penance for their crime. They had committed the sin of ingratitude and, for this; God, for whom ‘nothing is uglier than ingratitude’, had turned away from them and transferred His grace to, among other people, the Poles” (Tazbir 1998:235).

Contextualisation is vital in helping to understand the sentiments of all parties involved in any form of socio-religious disorder but should never justify outrageous behaviour. Still, contextualisation contributes to the explanation of why ideologies adopt a sense of radical immediacy and antinomian urgency. Although Elijah, as mentioned, does not mention this teaching of R. Heshil Tzoref at all, she similarly writes:

“Sabbatian teachings entailed messianic hopes of meta-historical vengeance against those who had murdered thousands of helpless Jews, as well as messianic hopes for redemption of those who survived” (Elijah 2012:87).

R. Heshil Tzoref is regarded by Liebes as one of the forerunners of the *Chassidic* movement and is somewhere between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*. His vengeful teaching emphasises the effects and influences of the Khmelnytsky massacres – with their pogroms, ensuing blood libels and the need for cosmic vengeance and restorative messianism – on both *Sabbatian* and *Chassidic* ideology.

Perhaps now it is easier to understand why Elijah is convinced of the extended effects of the massacres and sees them ultimately manifesting as not just one or two, but *three*, distinct responses: 1) the birth of the *Sabbatian* movement; 2) the rise of *Chassidic* movement; and 3) the emergence of the *Mitnagdic* movement of the conservative Orthodox who saw themselves as the centrist and “*established traditional rabbinical leadership*” that opposed both the new movements of *Sabbatians* and *Chassidim* (Elijah 2012:89).

Traumatic national events are never to be minimised in terms of the affected populations. In Jewish history, all roads of persecution led to messianism. We see this with the rise of messianism in the aftermath of the expulsion of Jews from Spain and

Portugal in 1492 and 1497⁹² respectively (Biale 1984:314). So too, the Khmelnytsky massacres cannot be ignored as a major influencing factor in the formulations of *Sabbatianism*, *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism*. The problem with this model of Elior, of course, is how to reconcile all these movements with their roots in an ignoble albeit cathartic theology of vengeance.

R. Heshil Tzoref, it seems, faced the same conundrum. He resolved it by using his mystical interpretations of the biblical verses of Exodus 17:16 (מִלְחָמָה לִיהוָה בְּעַמֶּלֶךְ) (מִדֶּר דֶּר), Genesis 25:26 (וַיֵּדֹ אֶחָזֵת בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו) and Jeremiah 1:14 (מִצְפּוֹן תִּפְתָּח הָרָעָה) as authoritative proof texts for a treacherous antinomian canonising and theologising of vengeance.

From a theological perspective, besides the obvious moral implications of any form of revenge, I prefer the less-popular model where more weight is placed on the influence the mystico-messianic (Idel 1998:183) *Sabbatian* movement exerted on the mystico-messianic⁹³ *Chassidic* movement. Although the persecutions were undoubtedly a major and significant factor, I argue that evidence of a more direct correspondence between late *Sabbatian* rabbinic *personalities* with their mystical *literature*, and the early *Chassidic* *personalities* with their mystical *literature*, is far more compelling (see section 2.5.6). I develop this *literature and personalities approach* further in this study when examining R. Heshil Tzoref in more detail (see section 4.7). He was a known *Sabbatian* leader yet his *Sefer haTzoref* is said to have been in the possession of, and praised by, the Baal Shem Tov (Rabinowitsch 1941:80-84) (see section 4.7.2).

⁹² I have referred to the expulsions from Spain and Portugal as if the expulsions were technically similar and parallel, as they are usually depicted. Research by Andrée Aelion Brooks (2002:19), however, reveals that in Portugal, an expulsion order only existed on paper and Jews were, instead, restricted from leaving Portugal, having to undergo forced conversions.

⁹³ Some scholars like Gershom Scholem (1941a:329) and his student Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer (1968:168), however, promote the idea of the *Chassidic* movement more as “neutralising” extreme messianism.

2.5.2 Rachel Elijor: B) *Chassidism* as democratisation of Judaism

As we have noted (see section 2.5.1), Elijor appears to disallow the possibility of any real and direct *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement and instead frames her conclusion regarding the origins of the *Chassidic* movement as one where:

“Hasidism, in its ideal conception, offered a new mystical approach to the great conundrums in the relationship between God and man in the hardship of history” (Elijor 2018:107).

Elijor describes *Sabbatianism*, *Chassidism* and even *Mitnagdism* as different responses to the same “*hardship of history*,” which would clearly include the recent Khmelnytsky massacres (see section 2.5.1). Besides the major role the Khmelnytsky massacres played in Elijor’s understanding of the rise of *Chassidism*, she offers an additional possible cause for the new movement – the need to ‘democratise’ Judaism.

In her view, the Baal Shem Tov took a selection of previous mysticism and combined that with more novel material which he generated himself (Elijor 2012:94). However, his great contribution, as is commonly acknowledged (except, as we shall see, for scholars like Mendel Piekarz who claim *Chassidism* was never intended to be a mass movement) was to have taken *Kabbalah*, a mystical *genre* that was previously the proclivity of a select minority and made it accessible to the masses even though they weren’t scholars:

“[W]hereas kabbalah relegated mystical practices to an elite few who separated themselves from the community and followed a pious way of life in order to devote themselves to sacred matters, the Ba’al Shem Tov saw every Jew as having the mystical potential to recognize the animating divine essence that suffuses everything” (Elijor 2012:95).

Elijor is certainly correct in her depiction of *Chassidism* as a democratisation of Jewish mysticism (whether or not it was its original intention) but I propose that the Baal Shem Tov was *not* the first to do so. It was Shabbatai Tzvi and his *Sabbatian* movement that did exactly that. The *Sabbatians* brought mysticism to the masses for the first time, and did so very effectively, creating probably the largest “*mystico-messianic*” movement in Jewish history (Idel 1998:183).

Shabbatai Tzvi, however one views him, undoubtedly succeeded in democratising Jewish mysticism on a scale never seen before. It can be demonstrated

that Shabbatai Tzvi was even more successful than the Baal Shem Tov in terms of the sheer number of followers. Although, as Aryeh Kaplan (1984:1) points out, after the passing of the Baal Shem Tov, the early *Chassidic* movement had “*captured virtually all of Eastern Europe*,” the early *Sabbatian* movement had spread far more widely and acquired considerably more adherents. *Sabbatianism* had reached:

“wherever Jews lived— from the Yemen, Persia, and Kurdistan to Poland, Holland, Italy, and Morocco” (Scholem 1973:2).

I suggest that the Baal Shem Tov saw an earlier model that worked. The masses, under Shabbatai Tzvi, had shown that they wanted mysticism. The Baal Shem Tov then seized upon that energy and was either influenced to some degree by it, or he wanted perhaps to cleanse it and change its form while maintaining its basic mystical ethos. Whichever way one chooses to view the origins of *Chassidism*, based even on these cursory observations, it is most likely that the Baal Shem Tov was influenced to some significant extent, at least by the success of the mystical components of the *Sabbatian* movement.

2.5.3 Gershom Scholem: “neutralisation” of *Sabbatianism*

Not all scholars agree with the categorisation that *Sabbatianism*, *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism* were essentially responses to tragedy (although they acknowledge that Khmelnytsky certainly was a significant factor), nor do all agree that *Chassidism* was even a messianic movement. It is also possible to view *Chassidism* as a response to *Sabbatianism*, as Gershom Scholem suggests, where the former rose to “neutralise” *Sabbatian* messianism:

“Hasidism tried to eliminate the element of Messianism...Perhaps one should rather speak of a ‘neutralization’ of the Messianic element” (Scholem 1941a:329).

Etkes (1996:453), in keeping with Scholem, explains that the Baal Shem Tov tried to neutralise the urgency of the *Lurianic* concept of *Tikun* (*rectification*) – which was to lead to messianic redemption, and which was adopted by the *Sabbatians* – by replacing it with ideas like *Deveikut* (*clinging to God* or *unio mystica*). Scholem generally tries to disentangle points of convergence between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*:

“One could easily make a collection of Hasidic epigrams which breathe a spirit not far removed from that of Sabbatianism...And yet Chassidism did not go the way of Sabbatianism” (Scholem 1941a:346).

According to Carlebach (1992:259), even Scholem’s downplaying and “*neutralization*” of the links between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* are a step too far:

“Many of the specific links between the two movements which had served as a basis for Scholem’s thesis have since proven too weak to sustain his contention. The tangled lines of spiritual influence in the Jewish world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries have yet to be fully unraveled.”

But it is not always an easy task extricating *Chassidism* from some significant degree of association with *Sabbatianism* since it did not seem to have had the expected aversion to it. Scholem describes the three movements of *Lurianic Kabbalah*, *Sabbatiansm* and *Chassidism* as three parts of one whole:

“Lurianic Kabbalism, Sabbatianism and Hasidism are after all three stages of the same process” (Scholem 1941a:327).

One must bear in mind that *Chassidism* developed to its fuller form in the midst of *Sabbatian* persecution by the mainstream rabbinate which began their first official ex-communications against the *Sabbatians* from as early as 1670,⁹⁴ yet:

“[t]he only Jewish leader in the mid-18th century who expressed strong resentment towards the rabbinical persecutions of the Sabbatians in 1756–1759 was Israel Ba’al Shem Tov” (Elior 2012:91).

This is surprising, considering that 1759 was almost one hundred years after 1666 when Shabbatai Tzvi had apostatised to Islam and was discredited as a Jewish Messiah. Yet all that time did not turn the Baal Shem Tov into an active or outspoken opponent of the *Sabbatian* movement as one might have expected. Of course, a counter-argument, as one would imagine to be put forward by followers of the Baal

⁹⁴ Elior (2012:90) claims that the anti-*Sabbatian* bans began much later, in 1713. Maciejko (2011:36), however, convincingly shows that they began in 1670. Maciejko (2011:37) does mention, though, that the “[l]ater excommunications were said to have more impact.”

Shem Tov, would be that his overwhelming *Ahavat Yisrael* or love for his people would have precluded such open opposition and that he would have dealt with the *Sabbatians* in more subtle and mystical ways. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Baal Shem Tov did not openly oppose *Sabbatianism* in a more direct way, was – with Scholem – that he rather intended to pursue the “*neutralization*” of the messianic elements of *Sabbatianism*.

It is difficult for me to understand Scholem’s downplaying of messianism as a major component of *Chassidism*. This is because, amongst other reasons, in a letter the Baal Shem Tov wrote to his brother-in-law, Gershom Kitov, in 1751,⁹⁵ he told of a ‘*heavenly ascent*’⁹⁶ he had experienced in which he saw the Messiah who promised he would appear as soon as his (the Baal Shem Tov’s) teachings spread to and pervaded the ‘*outside*’ world. The Messiah’s arrival was thus dependent upon the Baal Shem Tov’s teachings of *Chassidut*. The Messiah, according to the letter, said he would appear:

בעת שיתפרסם למודך ויתגלה בעולם ויפוצו מעינותך חוצה מה שלמדתי אותך

“at a time when your teachings have been popularised and revealed to the world, and your springs [of wisdom] have spread to the outside [world], as I have taught you” (‘The Letter of the Baal Shem Tov,’ in R. Yakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Ben Porat Yosef*, 1781:100).⁹⁷

This conceptualisation, in my view, makes messianism the very essence if not the *raison d’etre* of *Chassidism*.

2.5.4 Simon Dobnow: failure of the rabbinate

The historian Simon Dobnow sees the rapid rise and spread of *Chassidism* as a response to the harsh historical realities of the early eighteenth century. He suggests

⁹⁵ This letter remained concealed for thirty years in the possession of R. Yakov Yosef of Polonnoye who only ‘revealed’ it 1781 in his book *Ben Porat Yosef* (Etkes 1996:454).

⁹⁶ As an interesting aside, Michaelson (2023:196) loads the Baal Shem Tov’s “*heavenly ascent*” with *Sabbatian* innuendo because he suggests that the ascent itself was “*the kind of prophetic trance experience that was widespread in the Sabbatean movement.*” For more on the *Sabbatian* prophetic trance experiences, see Michal (2022a:122).

⁹⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine.

that the mainstream rabbis did not rise to the occasion because their emphasis was primarily on procedural and technical Torah study, and they weren't able to spiritually and emotionally support or uplift their suffering flock. Dubnow (1930:1-38) lays the blame squarely upon rabbinic leadership for their failure to meet the needs of the hour and this created an opening readily seized upon by the *Chassidic* movement. I am convinced, however, that a parallel argument could also be made for the rapid rise of the *Sabbatian* movement, just a short time before, bearing in mind that the rapid spread of *Sabbatianism* occurred during the post-apostasy period as it began to merge with the *Chassidic* period (see section 2.3). Additionally, there was indeed an abundance of ethical, moral, mystical and *Kabbalistic* literature popularly available in the period immediately preceding the rise of the *Chassidic* movement (see section 4.1).

2.5.5 Benzion Dinur: internal political corruption and messianism

Another historian, Benzion Dinur similarly sees *Chassidism* as a response to an internal crisis but *not a religious* one. According to him, there was political corruption in the Jewish leadership where certain individuals known as *Takifim* (*powerful ones*) curried favour with the Polish nobility and abused their ill-gotten power. This must have been widespread and commonplace for it to have created a concerted need to combat this practice. The opposition to the *Takifim* came from the poorer working class and found expression in the *Magidim* (*popular preachers*) who took up their cause. These *Magidim* (like the *Baalei Shem*) were considered second-rate to the official rabbis (see section 2.5.10). The *Chassidim*, who were soon to emerge from this same stratum of society, were known for their disregard towards the official leadership and they too engaged in the services of *Magidim*. Many of the early leaders of the *Chassidic* movement were also *Magidim*. The *Chassidic* movement also had a strong culture of caring for the poor and those generally neglected by society. This social awareness, according to Dinur, may not have been the primary cause of *Chassidism* but certainly was an important factor.

Etkes (1996:450) points out that Dinur's view of *Chassidism* as a restoration of social justice has as its theoretical basis in the tax ordinances of 1769 which were set out in Nesvizh to right the previous system of unjust taxation. One of the main signatories to this document was the *Chassidic* leader, R. Aharon 'the Great' of Karlin,

a student of the *Magid of Mezeritch*. At first glance, this does seem like a good example of *Chassidic* advocacy for social justice – supporting Dinur’s view. But Israel Halpern (1969b:333-339) challenges this assertion drawing attention to the fact that it was not R. Aharon of Karlin who *initiated* these tax ordinances. They were promulgated by the communal leaders of Nesvizh as common practice in many communities at that time and R. Aharon just happened to be visiting Nesvizh to take care of an unrelated religious duty. Based on these observations by Halpern, we may assume that:

“Originally, the hasidic leadership had no particular message of social reform; it confined itself to the religious, spiritual realm” (Etkes 1996:450).

As for the matter of *Chassidism*’s relationship with messianism, Dinur – unlike Scholem (1941a:329) who diminishes the role of messianism in *Chassidism* (see section 2.5.3) – maintains that messianism was a powerful foundational component of the new movement (Dinur 1955:92-159). Etkes (1996:453) describes Dinur’s depiction of *Chassidism* as “a messianic movement *par excellence*.”

Dinur explains that because of this overwhelming messianic mission of *Chassidism*, it had to be kept secretive to prevent the *Mitnagdim* from accusing the *Chassidim* of *Sabbatianism* (see a similar view advanced by Aryeh Kaplan in section 4.7.3). Scholem, for his part, simply rejected such a notion because he felt that *Chassidim* were just expressing the traditional Jewish belief in a Messiah and that there was nothing sinister about that (Scholem 1971a:176-202).

Etkes, however, completely rejects Dinur’s emphasis on the messianism of *Chassidism*, although he does acknowledge that Isaiah Tishby (1967:1-45) ‘modified’ Scholem’s “*neutralisation*” of messianism thesis by conceding that some of the early *Chassidic* leaders were indeed messianic.

2.5.6 Mor Altshuler: two phases of *Chassidic* messianism

Mor Altshuler (2004:132) suggests that although the Baal Shem Tov was initially concerned about messianism, it was from around 1740 – after his failed attempt to reach the Holy Land in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah – and particularly after his ‘ascent to heaven’ on *Rosh haShana* in 1746 where he claimed

to have met the Messiah,⁹⁸ and after his attempt to ‘fix’ the soul of Shabbatai Tzvi (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86-7), that he began to realise that the Messiah may not come in his lifetime as there was still much spiritual work that needed to be done. In this sense, it can be said that the Baal Shem Tov's grand messianic dream began to wane somewhat from 1740 onwards.

Twelve years after the passing of the Baal Shem Tov, however, powerful messianic aspirations were once again kindled around 1772 by his student, R. Yechiel Michal, the *Magid of Zlotchov*. 1772 was the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Ari, R. Yitzchak Luria, the founder of *Lurianic Kabbala*. R. Yechiel Michal of Zoltchov was now seen as the person around whom the messianic events would coalesce. It was around this second phase of *Chassidic* messianism from 1772, under the leadership of the *Magid of Zlotchov*, that Altshuler suggests the *Chassidic* movement began in earnest, with the establishment of the first significant *Chassidic* courts (Altshuler 2004:130).

Gershom Scholem (1976:241) has already noted that the *Magid of Zlotchov* was the first *Chassidic* leader to be called “*Tzadik*,”⁹⁹ and Altshuler uses this notion of “[t]he first *Tzaddik of Hasidism*” to promote her thesis that the *Magid of Zlotchov* was the first leader to effectively grow the movement. To this end, he was aided by the second wave of *Chassidic* messianism. *Chassidism* rapidly rose in ascendancy under his watch and he attracted most of its major future leaders (Altshuler 2004:135-137). On this view, *Chassidism* in its two early phases – under the Baal Shem Tov and later under the *Magid of Zlotchov* – was very much founded on the urgency of messianism.

2.5.7 Raphael Mahler: economic conditions and social order

Raphael Mahler (1985:3-67) strongly basing himself on Karl Marx's notion of ‘historical materialism,’ where historical change is affected by class and economic conditions, sees *Chassidism* as rising out of the economic and political suffering of Galician Jewry. Mahler, however, did not agree that *Chassidism* offered any real contribution to actual social reforms, but rather dealt with such matters spiritually and metaphysically. God's attribute of *Chessed* (*kindness*) was to be invoked to counter the opposing attribute of

⁹⁸ See ‘The Letter of the Baal Shem Tov,’ in Yakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Ben Porat Yosef*, Koretz, 1781:100.

⁹⁹ The term “*Tzadik*” generally refers to a *righteous person*. In the context of the *Chassidic* movement, however, the term “*Tzadik*” is often used interchangeably with the term “*Rebbe*.”

Gevura (severity of harsh judgement). *Bitachon* (trust in God), faith in the *Tzadik*, *Ahavat Yisrael* (love of one's fellow Jew) and the hope for messianic redemption were the only ways out of economic oppression. Mahler held to his Marxist-inspired view of *Chassidism* as a “readily identifiable class identity” which in this case was the great body of the masses and *petite bourgeoisie* (Etkes 1996:449).

Research by Moshe Rosman (1987:177-89) also shows some cracks in the portrayal of early *Chassidic* leaders championing the plight of the downtrodden and changing the social order. Rosman discovered documents in Polish archives that reveal how the Baal Shem Tov was – instead of alleviating the economic suffering of his people – supported by the very community structures he is claimed to have opposed.

While Dubnow, Dinur and Mahler use different language, they effectively see *Chassidism* as a response to the difficult political, economic and social conditions the masses of Galician Jews were subjected to.

2.5.8 Jacob Katz: “scholarly intelligentsia” and “religious experience”

Etkes' teacher, Jacob Katz (1993:195-201), corrodes the causal connection between the historical crises and the rise of *Chassidism*. He suggests that traditional Jewish communities had survived many crises before and, anyway, *Chassidism* should then have spread throughout the precise geographical areas where the crises occurred, including those regions where its opposition, the *Mitnagdim*, were located. This, he says, was not the case.¹⁰⁰ Katz determines that the main manifestation of all the crises was the weakening of social and communal cohesion. *Chassidism*, he says, did not emerge because of ‘crisis’ but once the movement was established, it *used* the ‘crisis’ to further develop and expand its spiritual enterprises. This approach allowed Katz to free himself:

“from the need to attribute spurious notions and values to hasidism. Moreover, he did not detract from the significance of religious experience as a motive force behind the growth of Hasidism” (Etkes 1996:451).

¹⁰⁰ Rabinowitsch (1970:xi), however, shows that *Chassidism* did indeed spread into Lithuania which is generally regarded as the impenetrable bastion of *Mitnagdism*.

Etkes concurs with Katz. He adds that contrary to commonly held perceptions, the early *Chassidic* movement did not draw from the ignorant and downtrodden masses but instead from the “*scholarly intelligentsia*” who welcomed the new and “*inherent appeal of the hasidic religious experience*.” This is also close to the view of Kaplan (1984:2-3) mentioned earlier (see section 2.4.3) where *Chassidism* was essentially about experientialism – although Kaplan held that the experiential component was directed at “*the average individual*,” in other words the masses, and not at the elite, as per Etkes. Regarding the need for experientialism, one could perhaps say that the ‘crisis’ was still there, except it was not of a historical but a religious nature. Etkes (1996:452) supports this experiential position by his observation that one of the early targets of the *Chassidic* movement was the dry and argumentative casuistic style of *Talmudic* analysis known as *Pilpul* (*sophistry*). In this view, the scholars were not spiritually satisfied with the overly technical process and dialectics of *Pilpul* and, instead, they were looking for something more meaningful and experiential.

2.5.9 Immanuel Etkes: *Chassidism* was not intended to be a mass movement

Etkes, basing himself on scholars like Mendel Piekartz, persists in challenging the popular notion of Scholem that *Chassidism* originated as, or was intended to be, a mass movement. He suggests that Scholem, writing after *Chassidism* had already become a successful mass movement, made an error in thinking it was originally envisioned to be so. Rather, according to Etkes, the Baal Shem Tov:

“operated within the exclusive framework of traditional mystical piety which was always intended for a few elect individuals” (Etkes (1996:460).

Piekartz (1996:226) writes that the early *Chassidic* masters originally saw themselves as custodians (or reinterpreters) of *Lurianic Kabbalah* but this was very soon to change:

“Not only does an ideological gap divide the spiritual world of the early [Chassidic] masters from that of the last hasidic leaders in eastern Europe, but even in the early period of hasidic growth and expansion

there was a wide range of ill-assorted and even contradictory opinions and beliefs within hasidism.”¹⁰¹

On this view, the *Chassidic* movement underwent a rapid¹⁰² process of evolution from just another elitist mystical movement to the mass it soon developed into. This area of study, suggests Etkes, is worthy of further research.

2.5.10 Elisheva Carlebach: Messianism devoid of *Sabbatian* content

According to Scholem, there were two approaches open to the disillusioned Jews in the aftermath of the apostasy of 1666. Either they return to their previous religious lifestyles or they double down and perpetuate their messianic belief that Shabbatai Tzvi was to return. The vast majority settled for the first option while a significant minority opted for the *Sabbatian* alternative. Elisheva Carlebach (1992:241), however, suggests a third alternative. Based on “[a] close reading of other eighteenth-century texts,” the possibility emerges that *Chassidism* may have drawn on an active form of messianism but devoid of any *Sabbatian* content. According to Carlebach, this third option “may provide the key in the debate over the *Sabbatian*-hasidic connection.”

The writings from around the end of the seventeenth century, by authors like Yehuda Leib of Zelechow and his *Shirei Yehuda*¹⁰³ provide an example of this unexplored *genre* of messianism. Yehuda Leib lived through the spiritually traumatic period of 1666. He believed that he had witnessed a genuine and unprecedented spirit of repentance by the masses of the people. Because of that, they were still at the cusp of messianic redemption, although no longer through the personage of Shabbatai Tzvi.

There was still time to prepare for the imminent true and final redemption – so imminent that he completed his book in less than a month. To not use the energy and spiritual collateral that had accrued, would be to miss the last chance of redemption, which would otherwise be transposed once again to a murky distant future. According to Yehuda Leib, the real Messiah was to arrive either in 1696 or 1714 (Carlebach 1992:248). He argued that now, all that was needed was a return to fervent prayer.

¹⁰¹ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁰² Etkes (1996:460) suggests the process was more gradual while Piekartz (1966:226) suggests the dramatic move from the *Magid of Mezeritch*, the elitist mystic, to his disciples establishing social institutions and *Chassidic* courts controlled by ‘*Tzadikim*,’ only took one generation.

¹⁰³ Amsterdam (1697).

Everything else had been put in place except for the proper concentration and focus on prayer which had been neglected. Prayer was the abandoned means of fixing a broken messianism. With this emphasis and building on prayer and the deconstruction of *Sabbatianism*, Carlebach builds her third option hypothesis, which is suggested as a possible influence on *Chassidism* in place of *Sabbatianism*.

Yehuda Leib was not a rabbi. He was a cantor or *Shaliach Tzibbur* (Prayer Leader). Carlebach describes this position as a “second rank religious functionary.” This description is not necessarily derogatory but indicative of the seventeenth-century social shift to a democratisation of Jewish leadership. The *Magidim* (moralistic preachers) that already emerged during *Sabbatian* times and later rose to leadership positions in the *Chassidic* movement, have similarly been described as a “secondary intelligentsia” (Etkes1996:448) of rabbinic leadership. So too the *Baalei Shem* (Wonder workers) who proliferated in the early period of the *Chassidic* movement are also described as “below contract rabbis.”¹⁰⁴ This hitherto ‘lower strata’ of clerical leadership, which generally related more to prayer, healing and pastoral work than to rabbinic scholarship, was to rise in prominence from the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century as the *Chassidic* movement was birthed:

The many proto-hasidic features in Shire Yehudah, such as the belief in the power of prayer to effect messianic redemption and the elevation of the second rank religious functionary to the central redemptive position of communal advocate before God, provide a better explanation of the spiritual matrix from which Hasidism arose” (Carlebach 1992:241).

Carlebach is convinced that Yehuda Leib was not a *Sabbatian* and that he drew from an earlier classical messianism. In this model, *Chassidism* was influenced by classical messianism and simply bypassed *Sabbatianism*:

“Yehudah Leib was not a Sabbatian, although the Sabbatian movement profoundly altered his inner spiritual world, and he became a messianic enthusiast. Here Jewish pietism that existed before the Sabbatian movement and which burst forth in waves during the height of the messianic movement, was directly channeled into Hasidism

¹⁰⁴ Online source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baal_Shem. Retrieved on 01 November 2022.

without a detour into the heretical sectarian world of the Sabbatians. Sabbatianism was not a direct antecedent of Hasidism; rather, it elicited a popular expression of a preexisting Jewish pietism which Hasidism also tapped” (Carlebach 1992:261).

I find it difficult to accept that *Chassidism* somehow skipped over the most powerful messianic movement in Jewish history “*without a detour into the heretical sectarian world of the Sabbatians*,” especially when the environment was so saturated with *Sabbatians*. Carlebach does not seem to acknowledge the far reach of *Sabbatianism* and regards the movement as having dissipated even before the advent of the *Chassidic* movement. This is evident in the latter part of her title which reads “*Jewish Messianism and Popular Spirituality in the Post-Sabbatian Century*.”

This study, however, argues in the other direction that *Sabbatianism* was very much alive – and even more active and influential – in the post-apostasy period; and that it continued well into and even beyond the eighteenth century. This study would regard a “*post-Sabbatian*” period to commence only well after the *Chassidic* movement was firmly established. If anything, the period before *Chassidism* would be best described as “*proto-Chassidic*,” rather than “*post-Sabbatian*.” There is no doubt that *Chassidism* would have adopted substantial aspects of classical, *Lurianic* and even neutral non-*Sabbatian* messianism that completely side-stepped *Sabbatianism*. However, as I try to demonstrate later in this study, *Sabbatian* influences on the popular *literature* of the time appears to have been immense and significant. Many of *personalities* and authors who produced these impactful works were deeply associated with the *Sabbatian* movement.

2.5.11 Rejection of the *Sabbatian* influences model

A noteworthy irony is that much of the scholarly consensus today is in favour of Scholem’s “*neutralisation*” theory where *Chassidism* actively downplayed its messianic elements. Yet that degree of consensus is notably absent when it comes to the acceptance of Scholem’s view that *Chassidism* emerged out of a sometimes obvious relationship with *Sabbatianism*, although Scholem (1941a:346) adamantly maintained that “*Chassidism did not go the way of Sabbatianism*”. I will try to show, however, that this relationship was intense, profound and encompassed “*literary*,

ideological and personal” (Etkes 1996:454)¹⁰⁵ bonds and pathways that surely connected *Sabbatianism* to *Chassidism*.

Scholem (1941a:330-331) certainly acknowledges this, although I don’t believe he goes far enough:

“The founder of Hasidism and his first disciples, therefore, must have been fully aware of the destructive power inherent in extreme mystical Messianism...They were active among the same people whom Sabbateanism had tried and partly succeeded in converting, and it is by no means impossible that there was at first a certain passing over of members from one movement to the other.”

In addition to Scholem’s acknowledgement of a “*certain passing over of members from one movement to the other*,” is the added complication that both movements often used a common nomenclature for important and definitive theological concepts.

2.5.11.1 Labels and common nomenclature

Scholem (1941a:331) points out that even before the Baal Shem Tov, there were groups of Polish *Sabbatians* who referred to themselves as “*Chassidim*.” However, he suggests that it took quite some time for the fundamental distinctions between early *Sabbatian* and modern *Chassidim* to sufficiently define and demarcate the differences between them. To my mind, this is a critical indication, if not evidence, of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement. Labels were very important in those times and still are today in all religious communities. We notice, for example, that the non-*Sabbatian* ‘*Kofrim*’ (*Deniers*) opposed the ‘*Maaminim*’ (*Believers*) of both the *Sabbatian* and *Frankist* camps. These were loaded theological labels. The followers of Shabbatai Tzvi were labelled in colloquial Yiddish as ‘*Shabsazviniks*’ (Akers 2011:155). Similarly, the inhabitants of Prossnitz, a stronghold of *Sabbatianism*, were known as ‘*Schepsen*,’ corrupted from ‘*Shabbatai Tzvi*,’ and an allusion to followers who act like ‘*sheep*.’ The expression ‘*Katshelabnik*,’ which means a “*goose leg*” in Hungarian, was often used as an insulting term for *Chassidim*.¹⁰⁶ It was also used to refer to *Sabbatians* who followed the *Sabbatian* messianic claimant, R. Liebele

¹⁰⁵ Etkes, while acknowledging these connections, maintains that the rise of *Chassidism* can be explained without having to resort to *Sabbatian* influences.

¹⁰⁶ Probably because they dressed distinctly in black and white, resembling a goose leg.

Prossnitz (*kat-shel-lieb* = *the sect of Lieb*) (Assaf 2009:199). The *Mitnagdim* were extremely careful to differentiate between themselves and the *Chassidim*, let alone the basic distinctions between *Sefaradim* and *Ashkenazim* as they identified strongly with the latter. It, therefore, seems likely that had the early *Chassidim* needed to separate themselves theologically from *Sabbatian Chassidim*, they would have immediately chosen a fundamentally different designation far removed from “*Chassidim*.” Religious movements would not generally adopt a common nomenclature with a movement it intends to theologically disassociate itself from.

2.5.11.2 Location thesis

Scholem (1941a:330), though later challenged by Michael Silver, maintains that:

“[i]t can hardly be called an accident that the Hasidic movement made its first appearance in the regions where Sabbatianism had taken strongest root, Podolia and Volhynia.”

Two students of Scholem, Isaiah Tishby (1964:204-226) and Joseph Weiss (1951:46-105, 1957:199-213) continued to highlight some of these *Sabbatian* links to *Chassidism*. Tishby drew attention to the writings of R. Yakov Koppel Lifschitz. Weiss studied a group located in Kutow who were pre-Baal Shem Tov *Chassidim* and the supposed links between the two movements. These findings by the camp of Scholem prompt Etkes (1996:456) to ask:

“Did Sabbateanism indeed play such a crucial role in the early stages of hasidism as Scholem and his disciples would have us believe?”

Etkes answers that it has become increasingly difficult to defend the views of the school of Scholem. Abraham Rubinstein (1967:338-339) challenged some of Tishby’s findings but he had to agree with Scholem that the correspondence in location between *Sabbatians* and early *Chassidim*:

“prove that hasidism in its early stages had some connections with Sabbateanism...”

But Etkes (1996:458) points out that this strong location thesis was eventually challenged by Michael Silver¹⁰⁷ who was able to show that there was, in fact, no

¹⁰⁷ In an unpublished paper as of the time of Etkes’ writing.

correspondence in location between the two groups. On the contrary, Silver maintains that *Chassidim* made an effort to focus on areas where there was no *Sabbatian* presence!

Still, even if Silver is correct, I think it is difficult to limit ideological influences to nuances of geography. Europe in the eighteenth century was a small place, particularly for the Jewish community which was connected by large numbers of itinerant scholars, healers and *Baalei Shem*, popular preachers and *Magidim*, travelling fundraisers and merchants, as well as *Sabbatians* (see section 2.4.2). Additionally, we know that *Sabbatian* ideas spread even beyond Europe to “*wherever Jews lived*” (Scholem 1973:2). Matt Goldish (2018a:34) similarly shows how R. Avraham Rovigo’s *Sabbatian* network encompassed vast areas of the Jewish world and was well-established and well-coordinated. And Zev Rabinowitsch (1970:xi) has shown that *Chassidism* even spread to the ‘impenetrable’ Lithuanian bastion of *Mitnagdim*.

2.5.11.3 Association thesis

Silver does not stop at challenging Scholem’s location theory but also confronts Weiss’ contention that the early *Chassidim* were personally associated with *Sabbatians*. All this prompts Etkes (1996:458) to proclaim:

“Today’s reader of Scholem, Tishby, and Weiss cannot but wonder at how these distinguished scholars could have been misled by such tenuous analogies.”

The rest of this study, however, progresses to further explore and test these “*tenuous analogies*.”

2.5.11.4 Multiple sources of influence thesis

To add to the list of contemporary scholars distancing themselves from the older schools, is Moshe Idel (1996:389-403) who argues that early *Chassidism* had a wider range of classical and traditional material to draw from and did not need to lean on *Sabbatianism*. Idel (2011b:69-103) disputes the popular view of *Chassidic* hagiography as well as many academic historians who claim Okopy, in Podolia, as the birth town of the Baal Shem Tov. Instead, he suggests the slightly more southern

regions of Walachia (Romania and Moldovia) as his childhood home. This distinction is not pedantic, but as Idel argues, has a bearing on possible influences the Baal Shem Tov may have been exposed to. In Walachia, the Baal Shem Tov would have been exposed to a very wide range of Russian schismatics – groups of Christians who wanted to break away from established churches and establish new ones – as well as Islamic mystical influences. This theory of Idel vigorously minimises the possibility of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement:

“The possible contacts with Csángós, Hutzuls, Hesychasts, and perhaps groups of wandering Gypsies, to name only a few of the salient religious groups in the region, in addition to the majority Orthodox and Catholic religious forms, should all be taken in consideration....” (Idel 2011b:89).

Idel adds that, in Walachia, there were Sufi influences and :

“elements of Turkish or Muslim folklore, such as the widespread stories related to Nassr a-Din Hodja” (Idel 2011b:76).

These influences, Idel suggests “*cannot be denied.*” He shows that hesychastic mysticism – with its techniques for reaching ascetic calmness – and the Baal Shem Tov’s model of mysticism may have converged in five distinct areas:

- 1) Both practised seclusion (although as the movement developed, the followers of the Baal Shem Tov, for the most part, did not adopt the approach of seclusion).
- 2) Both spoke of the centrality of prayer.
- 3) Both spoke of the need to deal with *machshavot zarot* (*alien thoughts*) which was critical to the attainment of the mystical goal.
- 4) Both spoke of the vital role of the spiritual mentor, the *Tzadik* in the case of the Baal Shem Tov, and the *Starets* as the holy men of hesychastic mysticism were known.
- 5) Both told stories and spoke of the importance of the role of the simple individual over the learned sage. *Chassidic* literature abounds with stories of simple folk like shepherds and innkeepers. Significantly it is in *Chassidism* that the importance of simple people and the model of simple storytelling “*make their*

first extensive appearance in the history of Jewish mystical literature” (Idel 2011b:89).

Idel certainly makes a strong case to show other possible influences on the Baal Shem Tov, besides *Sabbatianism*. However, I think there is a nuance to Idel’s position that should not be overlooked. It is clear from Idel’s considered research, that he does not regard *Sabbatianism* as a major influence on the *Chassidic* movement. I use the word ‘major’ because it seems to me that he still considers *Sabbatianism* a ‘significant’ influence. Idel (1998:206-207) is convinced that while, in the past, mysticism always led to messianism (Michal 2022a:16-17) – after *Sabbatianism*, messianism led to “*revelational phenomena*” in the form of a “*maggid or spiritual angelic mentor.*” Thus, one of the most important ‘short-term’ legacies of *Sabbatianism* was the apparition of visionary elements. This phenomenon was exemplified by R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746). Now, Idel agrees with Tishby that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto adopted some fundamental *Sabbatian* doctrines and “*many of his motifs are to be found only in Shabatean literature*” (Tishby 2008:231). And Idel (1988:207) writes:

“It is most likely, as Tishby has already pointed out, that Luzzatto contributed to the formation of the next important stream in Jewish mystical thought, Hasidism.”

This can only mean that Idel maintains that while *Sabbatianism* may not have been the ‘major’ cause of *Chassidism*, in his view it still was a ‘significant’ influence. And, as I understand Idel, while early *Chassidism* may indeed have had a wider range of earlier traditional and other external material to draw from, it still drew significantly from *Sabbatianism* (most likely through R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s contributions). Elisheva Carlebach (1987:1) also maintains that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was a “*precursor of Hasidism.*”

Etkes (1996:459), however, seems to go much further than Idel by stating that besides scholars like Yehuda Liebes (1995:1-111) (see section 5.3):

“the rise of hasidism as we know it today can be explained without postulating any links with Sabbateanism.”

2.5.11.5 Synthesis

Besides the apparent agreement over the shared designation of the term '*Chassidim*' (which in itself suggests a crossover culture), there are indeed many other forceful arguments leading in the other direction. These include challenges to the alleged common geographical locations and social interactions and associations between *Sabbatians* and *Chassidim*, as well as contested sources of influence. In addition to this is the debate over whether *Chassidism* promoted Jewish traditionalism or broke with it. This study's defence of the notion of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement therefore requires convincingly overcoming many respected and disparate scholarly views.

2.6 The traditionalism of *Chassidism* debate

Another aspect of *Chassidism* that is contested, is the degree to which it remained loyal to tradition. Here a debate ensues between two foremost modern historians: Jacob Katz suggests that *Chassidism* further corroded Jewish traditionalism while Shmuel Ettinger claims that on the contrary, it was a bastion of 'conservative' traditionalism (Etkes 1996:460).

Katz saw the eighteenth century as the beginning of a conflict between the forces of charismatic (*Chassidic*) and rationalist (Enlightenment) Jewish thought. Both movements limit, if not diminish, the role and purpose of tradition:

"[B]oth find the source of their authority in themselves, and tend to minimize any authority that rests solely on the force of tradition" (Katz 1993:9).

Katz continues that even the Baal Shem Tov:

"admitted that traditionally secular activities could become the means for achieving the sought-after exaltation" (Katz 1993:207).

Yaffa Eliach (1968:58) has shown that the Baal Shem Tov may have been exposed to Russian influences from the Russian Schismatics and dissenters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, she insists that *Chassidism* today is "*now a completely Jewish movement*" (Eliach 1968:82-83). Eliach – citing the work *Mekor*

¹⁰⁸ This view is similar to that expressed by Idel (see section 2.5.11.4).

Baruch,¹⁰⁹ – claims that *Chassidism* had been reined in and “*Judaised*” by an unlikely source, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), the leader of the *Mitnagdim*. Furthermore, the Vilna Gaon was ‘assisted’ by the efforts of the first *Chabad Rebbe*, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) who presented his *Chassidim* with a *Shulchan Aruch* (*Code of Jewish Law*) to keep them grounded in rabbinic Tradition. She brings support from an observation allegedly originating within the *Chassidic* movement itself. The third *Chabad Rebbe*, R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866), known as the *Tzemach Tzedek*, is recorded in *Mekor Baruch* as saying that *Chassidim* owe a debt of gratitude to the head of the opposition, the Vilna Gaon:

והוא זה, כי אנ"ש...אינם יודעים ואינם יכולים להעריך את ערך הטובה הרבה וההסד
הגדול אשר עשה עמנו הגר"א בחלקו עלינו...כי לולא המחלוקת ה' באמת יסוד
ומקום לדאוג ולחוש, כי השיטה החדשה שסללנו לנו, או יותר נכון - שאבותינו סללו
לנו בהמולה ושאו, תוליד אותנו לאת לאת צעד אחר צעד, הלאה מעבר הגבול הנועד
להמסורה התורנית והצוויית: ולא בלי יסוד ה' חשש גדול

“The Anash [=Chassidim] do not know, and cannot comprehend the depth of great goodness and immense grace the Gra [=Vilna Gaon] bestowed upon us [Chassidim]. For were it not for his polemic [against Chassidism], there would, in truth, be a foundation and space for concern and consternation, because the new approach [of Chassidism]...which our forebears paved for us with great tumult and disruption, would have led us, slowly, step by step, beyond the parameters of Tradition and Torah law: It is not without basis that there was a great concern” (R. Menachem Mendel recorded in R. Baruch haLevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch*, 1954:619a).¹¹⁰

R. Baruch haLevi Epstein writes in his *Mekor Baruch* that R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch told his father, R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, that he had never mentioned this to anyone before, other than to his grandfather, R. Shneur Zalman, and the latter’s

¹⁰⁹ *Mekor Baruch* was authored by R. Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941) and is a four-volume collection of memoirs and recollections from leading personalities of previous generations. His father, R. Yechiel Michal Epstein (1829–1908), the author of *Aruch haShulchan*, is said to have studied with R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch. Marc B. Shapiro, however, questions the accuracy of some of the material in *Mekor Baruch*. Online source: <https://seforimblog.com/2008/01/clarifications-of-previous-posts-by/>. Retrieved on 26 December 2022.

¹¹⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

son and successor the *Mitteler Rebbe*.¹¹¹ Both *Rebbes* concurred with this appraisal and they:

ונענעו לי בראשם, לומר, כי יפה כונתי ואמת שערתי

“nodded at me with their heads as if to say that my point was correct and my postulation truthful” (R. Menachem Mendel recorded in R. Baruch haLevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch*, 1954:619a).¹¹²

Assuming that the *Mekor Baruch* source is accurate, one wonders what context R. Menachem Mendel actually had in mind when he referred to early *Chassidism* as having the heretical potential to go “*step by step, beyond the parameters of Tradition*”? This was because the charge of *Sabbatianism* was one of the main concerns of the Vilna Gaon’s polemic against the *Chassidim*! *Mekor Baruch* continues quoting R. Menachem Mendel, that had early *Chassidism* remained unchecked:

סוף סוף תהי' התורה התלמודי נכזית מלהט אשה של קבלה, וזאת התורה הנסתרת
תמעט רוב דמותה של התורה הנגלית

“in the end, the Talmudic Torah would have been extinguished by the burning fires of Kabbalah, and this hidden Torah would have reduced the very fabric of the revealed Torah” (R. Menachem Mendel recorded in R. Baruch haLevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch*, 1954:619a).¹¹³

R. Menachem Mendel continues:

וגם כי ספרי “השלחן ערוך” של חותי זקני נ”ע - הוסיף הרב לומר - ידעתי נאמנה כי
רק לרגלי המחלוקת נבראו, כדי לקרב ביותר את לבות אנ”ש לאורח חיים עפ”י תורת
ההלכה...ואלמלי באה המחלוקת רק בשביל שנזכה באלה הספרים - דינו

“I also know that the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Law) composed by my grandfather-in-law [R. Shneur Zalman] was only produced in the aftermath of the Dispute [between the Vilna Gaon and the Chassidim, and it was written], with the intention of keeping the Anash [=Chassidim] within the confines of the Law...And if this dispute only

¹¹¹ The *Mitteler* (Yiddish for *middle*) *Rebbe*, R. Dovber was the son and successor of his father R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (also known as the *Baal haTanya* and *Alter Rebbe*), and uncle and father-in-law of R. Menachem Mendel (*Tzemach Tzedek*).

¹¹² Translation is mine.

¹¹³ Translation is mine.

arose to merit [the subsequent production] of these books [i.e., R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Shulchan Aruch*], it would have been worth it" (R. Menachem Mendel recorded in R. Baruch haLevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch*, 1954:619a).¹¹⁴

According to this source, there appears to be a tacit admission to early antinomianism of some sort existing during the first two generations of the *Chassidic* movement (before R. Shneur Zalman), which was only assuaged by the unlikely dual inputs of the Vilna Gaon from without and R. Shneur Zalman from within.

The "*burning fires of Kabbalah*" and "*hidden Torah*," of course, could be normal metaphors for general Jewish mysticism. However – in my view – the fact that they are used here in the context of a fundamentally threatening and dangerous literature leading potentially "*beyond the parameters of Tradition and Torah law*," may indicate a reference to a particular brand of "*hidden Torah*," namely, *Sabbatian Kabbalah*. *Sabbatian Kabbalah* was antinomian and anti-*Halachic*, and that is why it had to be countered by the Code of Law, the *Shulchan Aruch* of R. Shneur Zalman to keep the followers "*within the confines of the Law*."

Although historically, there has often been opposition to mysticism, I am not aware of any other form of mysticism being regarded so vehemently as an existential threat to Torah Judaism. Even *Lurianic Kabbalah* is considered more extreme than its softer counterpart in the form of the *Chassidut* which later emerged from the school of the Baal Shem Tov. It, therefore, seems unlikely that *Chassidut* (in its developed form) would have been considered such a major threat. The threat that the Vilna Gaon is said to have averted must have been perceived to come from a specific "*hidden Torah*," which I suggest is a veiled reference to *Sabbatian* mysticism.

One might even be able to read this interpretation into the aforementioned text of *Mekor Baruch* which indeed seems to refer to a *specific hidden Torah* that was considered to be an existential threat to traditional Judaism:

וזאת התורה הנסתרת תמעט רוב דמותה של התורה הנגלית

¹¹⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

“**This** hidden Torah [and not mainstream mysticism] would have reduced the very fabric of the revealed Torah” (Epstein, *Mekor Baruch* 1954:619a).¹¹⁵

“**This** hidden Torah” – and not mainstream mysticism nor even *Chassidut* – in my reading of this text – is an allusion to *Sabbatian* elements that certainly the Vilna Gaon and most likely R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi would have been aware of.

Ettinger, who argues that *Chassidism* did not deviate from traditionalism, does not refer to this text, but he suggests that even if questionable anti-traditional notions existed in the early stages of the movement, once it became established, the *Chassidic* movement took it for granted that traditional values were to be upheld. Ettinger maintains that this is corroborated by the fact that none of *Chassidism*’s early teachings emphasised religious observance – because it was not necessary to do so:

“[T]here are surely no grounds for the contention that hasidism weakened Jewish society and its communal organization. The very opposite is true. After a brief period of inner conflict, hasidism was granted legitimacy” (Ettinger 1960:17).

What I find intriguing is this rather vague reference to a “*brief period of inner conflict*” which I feel should not be played down or ignored. Also, interesting to note about this ‘traditionalism of Chassidism debate’ is how Etkes reconciles both views of Katz and Ettinger:

“Katz rightly pointed out the antinomistic potential of hasidism. The leaders of the movement, however, were aware of the danger and averted it in time” (Etkes 1996:463).

Ettinger and Etkes claim that the *Chassidic* movement self-corrected from within, unlike R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch who – if one accepts the testimony of *Mekor Baruch* – believed the movement was restrained and rescued by the outside *Mitnagdic* forces of the Vilna Gaon.

¹¹⁵ Square brackets are mine.

2.6.1 Synthesis

Having earlier articulated the necessity to overcome some of the scholarly hurdles in order to promote the hypothesis that *Chassidism* was influenced by *Sabbatianism*, I think the *Mekor Baruch* source is valuable because it is an internal rabbinical document attesting to an unlikely ‘partnership’ between *Chassidim* and *Mitnagdim* against early *Chassidic* antinomianism. In my reading, early *Chassidic* antinomianism can only allude to a tacit acknowledgement of *Sabbatian* elements within the early *Chassidic* movement as openly expressed by the Vilna Gaon.

The following section introduces another contested issue that needs to be addressed and that is the degree of *literary* and *social* association between *Sabbatians* and early *Chassidim*.

2.7 A literature and personalities approach

A common point of convergence in the scholarly overview thus far is that most observers do agree that *Chassidism* ‘mainstreamed’ to some significant extent over time. That is not the issue at stake. The question is how deep was the original “*antinomistic potential*” which is recognised and acknowledged even by the more conservative scholars? And what exactly was “*averted...in time*” (Etkes 1996:463)? Was it just basic mystical tenets (whether classical or innovative) or was it *Sabbatian* influences from a society saturated with secret *Sabbatians* and a body of mystical literature encoded in *Sabbatian* innuendo?

I maintain that it was the latter, and swim against the stream of scholarly consensus and tend towards Scholem’s general acknowledgement of *Sabbatian* influences, but I go further. This is because, as a rabbi and not a historian or sociologist, I find the texts and theology of the rabbis of the period between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* to be most compelling. For me, the *literature* and rabbinic *personalities* occupying that space between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* contain too many obvious points of intersection to be overlooked in favour of other phenomena. I have to concur with Paweł Maciejko (2004:207) who writes that Scholem’s view:

“is not a superficially imposed approach that bends historical reality and subsumes it under external categories or concepts.”

Instead, in Scholem's own words, it is:

“the outcome of a constantly renewed immersion in the sources themselves” (Scholem 1973:xi).

In addition to the *literary* sources that remain after an extensive program of censorship, are the *personalities* that we shall explore as well. Zeev Gries (1994:118) notes that:

“Gershom Scholem had pointed to the crucial role of the itinerant Sabbatean preachers in the expansion of the biggest messianic movement in Jewish history. Some of the records of their contemporaries are now available in print, and thus we have a vivid picture of the activities of [Sabbatian] preachers, rebukers and ‘prophets’...”¹¹⁶

Josef Weiss (1985:12-17) further developed the notion of the literary influence of these *Sabbatian* personalities on the thought of the early *Chassidism*. These personalities “formed an unofficial elite in the Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia.” It is there, in both the writings and rabbinic personalities of the “unofficial elite” during the dawn phase of the *Chassidic* movement, that I dig and search for further information.

It is also my contention that one should not overestimate Scholem's “neutralisation” of *messianism* theory and confuse it with a “neutralisation” of *Sabbatian theology* theory; nor underestimate his view on the degree of *Sabbatian* influence, particularly on subsequent ‘new Kabbalistic’¹¹⁷ literature:

“Whatever essential originality later Kabbalah contains is derived mainly from the Kabbalah of the Shabbateans...Although their books were not printed, they were frequently copied, and the influence of their ideas on those who were secret adherents of Shabbateanism is easily recognizable...some of the greatest rabbis were to be counted among the concealed Shabbatean faithful...” (Scholem 1987:90).

To me, this indicates a veritable and well-buried minefield of *Sabbatian* thought, ideology, literature and influential rabbinic leadership, across which it would be very difficult to traverse without uncovering significant degrees of *Sabbatian* influence.

¹¹⁶ Square brackets are mine.

¹¹⁷ Scholem refers to this subsequent period of “new Kabbalah” to be primarily between 1670 and 1730. This would have included pre-*Chassidic* and even early *Chassidic* thought.

An internal *Chassidic* tradition, by its own admission, speaks of inheriting some form of spiritual *legacy* and *literature* albeit from unclear sources such as Achiya haShiloni and R. Adam. This spiritual legacy took on a literary and material form in actual writings. According to *Shivchei haBesht*, it was a body of some obviously concrete literature in “secret manuscripts” which were “hidden in a cave” and “concealed...in the inner fold of [the Baal Shem Tov’s] garment (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:13-18). Whether the details of these descriptions are legendary or not, it is astounding that this *Chassidic* tradition ascribes its foundational origins to some secret collections of literature, at a time when the only other writings that needed to be secretive and hidden away, were those of a *Sabbatian* nature. And that same tradition describes the custodian and transmitter of those writings as an obscure figure at a time when the only other rabbinic personalities that had to remain in the shadows, were crypto-*Sabbatians*.

Besides the theories and debates over historical crises, messianic neutralisation, elitist or mass followings, new experientialism or revitalisation of *Lurianism*, location theories, and deliberations on how rapidly *Chassidism* extricated itself from *Sabbatianism* – what interests me, again as a rabbi and not a sociologist or historian, is the theological incubation point and the crossover doctrinal juncture which was defined by significant rabbinic *texts* and the rabbinic *personalities* who produced and transferred them. It is on this *literature* and these *personalities* that I base the further content of this investigation. This is in keeping with the subtitle of this study – “an excursion into *messianic Kabbalah* and its *disseminators* in the aftermath of Shabbatai Tzvi.”

2.7.1 Synthesis

The general literature review has shown that although there are sufficient parallels between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* in terms of time, place, literary content, rabbinic leadership and personalities to at least alert one to the possibility of some degree of ideological overlap – for some reason, these remain a blind spot in much of the scholarly world. Most of the focus is directed toward the vindication and extrication of *Chassidism* from the taint of the charge of *Sabbatianism*.

Jay Michaelson, however, does not mince his words about the *Sabbatian* influences on *Chassidism* when he writes:

“Hasidism domesticated, popularized, and adapted Sabbateanism and Sabbatean Kabbalah, whose messianic, mystical, and emotional ‘intensification of religious life’¹¹⁸ birthed what is now known as Jewish spirituality. It was not the Hasidic masters who originated this movement; it was the Sabbateans” (Michaelson 2022:190).

In concurrence with this approach, this study tacks against the scholarly headwinds and examines just how deep some of the connections and interactions between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* – arguably the two most powerful spiritual movements in modern Jewish history – may have been.

We now turn to chapter three and survey the structures of a society saturated with secret *Sabbatian literature* and clandestine *Sabbatian personalities*, to determine whether there was a potential for significant *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements.

¹¹⁸ This is a quotation from Idel (1998:16).

CHAPTER 3

A SOCIETY SATURATED WITH SECRET SABBATIAN PERSONALITIES

3.1 Introduction

As part of this study's *literature and personalities approach* to the question of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements, I now focus on the rabbinic personalities who acted as carriers of *Sabbatian* thought, to show who they were, how far and wide their nets were cast, and how committed they were to their cause:

“[I]t was extremely difficult for people who had invested their faith, worldly goods, and human dignity in Sabbatai simply to drop the whole matter instantly... [and] certain rabbis had [difficulty] in relinquishing the spiritual gains they perceived in the wave of repentance accompanying the messianic excitement” (Goldish (2018b:500)).¹¹⁹

It is of consequence to note that the communities that perpetuated *Sabbatianism* – counterintuitively – became all the stronger even when challenged by the unimaginable apostasy of their Messiah. This was because they doubled down and:

“[a] hard core maintained and even strengthened its commitment, a phenomenon well documented in the history of prophetic movements” (Goldish 2018b:500).

Leon Festinger, in his study entitled “*When Prophecy Fails*”, writes:

“The Sabbatian movement strikingly illustrates the phenomenon we are concerned with: when people are committed to a belief and a course of action, clear disconfirming evidence may simply result in deepened conviction and increased proselyting” (Festinger, Riecken and Schachter 1956:12).

¹¹⁹ Square brackets are mine.

Festinger's psychological discovery is most interesting and pertinent to this study: The more one utterly invests in an idea (especially a spiritual or religious concept or construct) and the more one is prepared to sacrifice for that same notion – the more resilient and steadfast one becomes in the face of any real evidence to the contrary. No hard data in the world is likely to change the mind of one who has undergone such a process. Instead of abandoning the original set of beliefs, the adherent often doubles down and holds them to be even stronger and truer, because:

“it may even be less painful to tolerate the dissonance than to discard the belief and admit one had been wrong” (Festinger, Riecken and Schachter 1956:27).

The late seventeenth-century Jewish community was faced with the strange reality and “*incongruous disparity*” (Goldish (2018b:500) of having two communities, often side by side; one openly adopting *Sabbatian* ideology and practices, while the neighbouring community had successfully outlawed all vestiges of *Sabbatianism*. Scholem (1973:736) maintains that generally, the larger communities had managed to keep *Sabbatianism* at bay and only the smaller communities continued with their antinomian beliefs, but Goldish shows that some large communities, like Thessalonica, continued to remain thriving *Sabbatian* centres. Other cities like Amsterdam may have also been more active than reported. It is important to bear in mind that we do not have all the information that we should have, because:

“[t]here are ideological issues at stake here. Traditional Jews were embarrassed by the movement, especially the participation of respected rabbis in it, and thus sought to present its penetration as minimal and limited to the ignorant classes” (Goldish 2018b:509).

This means that the following presentation of influential *Sabbatian* rabbinic personalities is only a small window into what was most certainly a far broader societal saturation of *Sabbatianism* – just before, and continuing around the same time as the *Chassidic* personalities were beginning to emerge.

R. Yakov Emden (1697-1776), in his *Edut beYakov*, describes how he saw the pervasiveness of *Sabbatianism* during his times, which extended well into the eighteenth century as he passed away seventeen years *after* the Baal Shem Tov. His observation was that the mainstream rabbinic authorities turned a blind eye to

Sabbatians who were firmly and deeply integrated within the community. He complained about the porosity of the official religious structures which allowed a side-by-side and crossover culture to persist. Important and very influential rabbis accused of harbouring secret *Sabbatian* sentiments such as R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz and R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto were exonerated by glib apologies (R. Yakov Emden, *Edut beYakov*, 1756:50r). The leadership permitted *Sabbatian* literature to be published and openly disseminated (R. Yakov Emden, *Edut beYakov*, 1756:50v).

Some synagogues accommodated *Sabbatian* prayers being recited within their precincts, and travelling *Sabbatian* preachers were welcomed to deliver talks, often with explicit *Sabbatian* content (R. Yakov Emden, *Edut beYakov*, 1756:50v-51r). Bans of ex-communication seemed to be only window dressing as they were generally ignored. In fact, a point stressed time and again in R. Yakov Emden's *Igeret Shum* (R. Yakov Emden, *Edut beYakov*, 1756),¹²⁰ was that in the case of the alleged *Sabbatianism* of Chief Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeschuetz (see section 3.1.7), for example, all that was needed to was for rabbinic authorities to simply enforce the existing bans (Maciejko n.d.:65).

Throughout this period, this type of attitude was concerning to the mainstream rabbinate because of their lingering knowledge that:

“quite a few of the most influential moral preachers and authors were in fact secret Shabbateans, on the moderate and Hasidic wings” (Danieli n.d.:100).

There was a disconnect within the rabbinic world because in some cases, to be suspected of *Sabbatianism* was not just a theoretical question of *Hashkafa* or *Weltanschauung*, but sometimes had very real implications insofar as practical religious law or *Halacha* was concerned:

“[I]t alarmed the rabbinic authorities, who considered the children of these sectarians as bastards and therefore no longer admissible to the fold” (Danieli, n.d.:100).

¹²⁰ *Igeret Shum*, or letter to the rabbis of the ‘Four Lands,’ is incorporated within R. Yakov Emden's *Edut beYakov*, Altona, 1756.

The following section encompasses many names and rabbinic personalities, and of necessity has to be detailed to show just how pervasive *Sabbatianism* was. Although perhaps cumbersome, I intentionally write the names of the rabbis in full to illustrate that their power and influence were exerted while they were acting in their official capacity as leaders in *rabbinic* positions. This is to emphasise that these rabbis did not just fall under the general, if not misleadingly broad title, ‘*Sabbatians*’ – as if they were something other than ‘proper’ rabbis – but, as I demonstrate, they were indeed part of the rabbinate and often very much so.

3.2 The *Sabbatian* circle (or *Beit Midrash*) of R. Avraham Rovigo

We begin with R. Avraham Rovigo (c.1650–1714) because his story shows just how structured and organised *Sabbatianism* was at around the time of the birth of the Baal Shem Tov. It will also afford us an opportunity to become familiar with some of the other rabbinic personalities we shall soon encounter:

“Rovigo’s methods and projects offer a model of the directions taken by...Sabbateans during this period” (Goldish 2018b:510).

R. Avraham Rovigo was a *Sabbatian* in a leadership and organisational position. He kept a diary of *Sabbatian* travellers and emissaries who came to meet with him in his home in Modena, Italy, during the periods 1679–1694 and 1698–1699. Modena had about one thousand Jewish inhabitants and was strategically situated at the crossroads between north and south, and east and west of the Jewish world. R. Avraham Rovigo’s diary was only discovered as late as 1961, by Isaiah Sonne (1961: 275–295). Because of the richness of its details concerning the personalities who transacted with him, Goldish (2018a:25) describes this seemingly innocuous discovery as “a singularly precious document for early modern Jewish historiography.”

R. Avraham Rovigo had studied in Venice, under R. Moshe Zacut¹²¹ (1620–1697) who was “the most renowned Italian Jewish scholar and kabbalist of the day” (Goldish 2018a:26). R. Moshe Zacut, however, was also associated at some stage with the *Sabbatian* movement (Sclar 2017:63). R. Avraham Rovigo’s study partner was R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale (1651–1730) who later became the rabbi of Reggio. R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale was the father-in-law of R. Yeshayahu Bassan, the

¹²¹ Also known as Zacuto.

teacher of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (see section 3.1.10). R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale was brazen enough to hang a portrait of Shabbatai Tzvi in his home and he openly published a *Kabbalistic* work on the Book of Lamentations according to the tradition of R. Natan of Gaza.

R. Avraham Rovigo perfected a model of behaviour that came to exemplify the dualism of many *Sabbatian* rabbinic personalities:

“[Rovigo] maintained a successful business in an environment often unfriendly to Jews, and he was renowned for his scholarship, but in private he was the generation’s leading Jewish patron of [Sabbatian] prophecy” (Goldish 2018a:27).¹²²

Although many *Sabbatian* leaders passed through his doors, R. Avraham Rovigo was adept at hiding his *Sabbatian* leanings and they only became public knowledge about a year before his death in 1714 when he showed his support for the known *Sabbatian*, R. Nechemia Chayon (see section 3.1.4) in the latter’s famous controversy with the anti-*Sabbatian* R. Moshe Chagiz (Goldish 2018a:28).

R. Avraham Rovigo’s diary gives us a unique perspective on a cross-section of rabbinic personalities during that period, which overlapped at least fourteen years of the Baal Shem Tov’s lifetime. These rabbis helped shape the Judaism that was to emerge during the critically influential eighteenth century. Many of the rabbis who visited R. Avraham Rovigo were considered to be ‘prophets’ in the sense that they claimed to have mystical visitations by beings known as *Magidim*. Part of *Sabbatian* ideology was the return to an era of biblical prophecy that had been discontinued since the Second Temple era. The group claimed that they experienced the manifestations of *Magidim* just like R. Natan of Gaza had experienced.

In charge of the ‘channelling’ process to draw down these *Magidim* was R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter who hailed from Prague and now taught these mystical techniques in R. Avraham Rovigo’s home over a period of five years. There can be no mistaking of the intentions of this group that had coalesced around the house of R. Avraham Rovigo because the focus of the prophecy ‘channelled’ by R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter was on the imminent return of the Messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi (Goldish 2018b:511).

¹²² Square brackets are mine.

3.3 R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter (Eibeschuetz) and ‘prophecy’

R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter (c.1650-1713) was born into the Eibeschuetz family but, according to the custom at that time, he assumed the family name of his wife, Bella Perlhefter (Singer and Wiernik 1906:643). The Eibeschuetz family was later to get further embroiled in the most infamous *Sabbatian* controversy of all time between *Sabbatian* expositor R. Yakov Emden and R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz (see section 3.1.7).

From its inception, ‘prophecy’ had been an important component of *Sabbatianism* in general, and it was perfected by R. Avraham Rovigo’s group in particular. A difference between *Sabbatian* prophecy and biblical prophecy was that in the *Sabbatian* model, an average or even an ignorant person could prophesy. In addition to this democratisation of prophecy, *Sabbatianism* also developed the “*structure of a cell around a central figure*,” as well as “*the increasingly international and intercommunal nature of the Sabbatean network*.” All of these three notions were relatively new phenomena to Judaism (Goldish 2018b:513).

It is my contention that these three *Sabbatian* innovations may have been adopted by *Chassidism* with its similar emphasis upon: 1) the simple or average individual; 2) the structure of a “*cell*” or “*sect*” around the central figure of the *Tzadik*; and 3) the sense of belonging to an “*intercommunal network*” of fellow *Chassidim* as a distinct group within the larger body of Judaism.

As an example of the typical “*mystico-messianic*” (to borrow a phrase from Idel 1998:183) mindset – if not mystico-messianic politics – of some of these associates of R. Avraham Rovigo, the following incident is illuminating. In 1681, R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter invited his trusted *Sabbatian* colleagues from his hometown of Prague, R. Mordechai Eisenstadt (1650-1729)¹²³ together with his brother R. Meir Eisenstadt, to join him in Italy to help build up the *Sabbatian* community. Somehow, one of the Eisenstadts, or their associates, insulted R. Avraham Rovigo before they had even arrived. It seems the insult originated from the entourage of R. Meir Eisenstadt, and R. Mordechai Eisenstadt tried to set the relationship right. The hosts, R. Avraham Rovigo and R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter, however, were not prepared to be

¹²³ Also known as Mordechai Mochiach, the ‘rebuker’ (*Mochiach*=rebuke), as many of these travelling preachers were called. His son R. Yehuda Löb Mochiach, was an eminent *Talmudist* (Deutsch 1906:14).

reconciled. In response – or retribution – R. Mordechai Eisenstadt then declared that Shabbatai Tzvi was not the real Messiah but rather just a messianic prelude to the actual Davidic Messiah – R. Mordechai Eisenstadt himself! He also claimed that Shabbatai Tzvi's conversion to Islam was necessary from a mystical point of view in order to 'elevate the fallen sparks' and that his death was merely an 'illusion.' As a result of all this disruption, R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter suddenly left the group in Modena and was also forced to leave his rabbinic post in Mantua as he was now suspected of *Sabbatianism* (Singer and Wiernik 1906:644). However, he returned to Prague where he served as a rabbinic judge while still maintaining his ties with the prophetic circle of *Sabbatians* in Modena (Goldish 2018b:511-512).

Like so many of these *Sabbatian* rabbis, R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter's rabbinic acclaim should not be underestimated. Isaiah Tishby notes from letters preserved in the British Museum,¹²⁴ that he was an extremely respected rabbinic leader, esteemed even by his peers:

למדנו, שר' בער פערלהעפטר זכה למעמד נכבד מאוד באיטליה, נתפרסם ברבים כחכם גדול בנגלה ובנסתר וכצופה נסתרות ומגיד עתידות, ואפילו רבנים ידועים ביקשו עצה והדרכה ממנו. ל'בני היכלא' גילה גם סודות שבתאיים והתנבא על מהלך הגאולה לעתיד

"We learn that R. Baer Perlhefter commanded a highly respectful position in Italy, he was widely recognised as a great sage, both in the revealed and hidden [traditions. He was believed to be] a seer and soothsayer [and] even well-known rabbis consulted him and took advice from him. To the members of his circle, he revealed Sabbatian secrets and prophesied on the progress of the future redemption" (Tishby 1957a:15).¹²⁵

R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter authored a number of rabbinic works including *Ohel Yissachar*, on the laws of ritual slaughtering (Singer and Wiernik 1906:644). Tishby found one letter referring to R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter as a great promotor and advocate of *Sabbatian* ideology. He was able to restore people's belief in Shabbatai Tzvi even after they had lost their *Sabbatian* 'faith' as a result of the apostasy. R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter is just another example of the dichotomy and dualism of

¹²⁴ Ms Or. 9165. The letters are correspondence between R. Avraham Rovigo and R. Meir Rofo from Hebron.

¹²⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

those unusual times with rabbis commanding respect from ‘both sides of the isle’ as it were.

3.4 R. Chaim Malach, R. Yehuda Chasid and the *Sabbatian Aliya*

Another member of R. Avraham Rovigo’s group was R. Chaim Malach (c.1650/60 – 1716/7) who was perhaps the most scholarly and radical of the *Sabbatian* rabbis. His *Sabbatian* connections are undeniable considering that he was well-associated with R. Shmuel Primo, the scribe of Shabbatai Tzvi, as well as with R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (see section 2.2.1). R. Chaim Malach strongly promoted the idea of *Aliya* (immigration to the Holy Land), preferably before 1706, when it was predicted that Shabbatai Tzvi would make his second appearance. R. Chaim Malach made an early *Aliya* in 1695 with about one hundred and fifty followers.

A few years later, around 1700,¹²⁶ a much larger *Sabbatian Aliya* comprising about 1 500 thousand followers – roughly the number of the Jewish population of the city of Modena – was organised by R. Yehuda Chasid,¹²⁷ who partnered with R. Chaim Malach. About one-third of the travellers died during the journey. The thousand or so that made it to the Holy Land, doubled the existing Jewish population of Jerusalem which now reached 1 200 (Greenbaum 1995:129). Although R. Yehuda Chasid passed away just days after his arrival, his group remained in the Holy Land. The *Sabbatian* followers built a synagogue in Jerusalem, on the ruins of an earlier fifteenth-century synagogue, but it was soon destroyed by the Ottomans when the impoverished *Sabbatian* immigrants could not afford the taxes, and it became known as the famous *Churvat (ruins of) Yehuda Chasid* (see sections 6.3 and 6.5). The *Churva* synagogue was eventually restored in 2010.

Two years later, in 1702, R. Avraham Rovigo, together with his student and ‘prophet,’ R. Mordechai Ashkenazi, travelled to Jerusalem to establish a *yeshiva*. The *yeshiva* appeared to be like any other *Kabbalistic yeshiva* except that they celebrated the *fast of Tisha beAv*,¹²⁸ which commemorates the destruction of the

¹²⁶ The date of this *Sabbatian Aliya* is alternately given as 1700 and 1701 and even 1702 (Schacter 2001:13). This discrepancy may have to do with the fact that there were different groups and “were joined by many others en route” (Greenbaum 1995:129).

¹²⁷ Not to be confused with R. Yehuda heChassid (d.1217) of the German Pietists known as *Chassidei Ashkenaz*.

¹²⁸ The fast of the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av.

Temple, as a *festive day*, since it was also the birthday of Shabbatai Tzvi. Following the untimely death of R. Yehuda Chasid, R. Avraham Rovigo assumed the leadership role of the *Sabbatians* who now formed the most dominant community in Jerusalem. The symbolic significance of this large *Sabbatian* presence in Jerusalem indicates the prestige and authority this movement still commanded even after the birth of the Baal Shem Tov.

The reason why R. Avraham Rovigo did not join the earlier *Aliya* of R. Yehuda Chasid in 1700, was because at that time he was still working together with his *Sabbatian* “student and prophet” R. Mordechai Ashkenazi on their work entitled *Eshel Avraham*.¹²⁹ The book offered *Kabbalistic* interpretations revealed through dreams and was only published in 1701 (Goldish 2018a:33). It was based on the mystical teachings of the *Zohar* that R. Mordechai Ashkenazi had learned from his teacher. According to R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen (see section 3.1.11), R. Mordechai Ashkenazi was not steeped in traditional *Talmudic* learning but he ‘acquired’ this knowledge through a *Magid* during his association with R. Avraham Rovigo (R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen, *Yesh Manchilin*, 1986:74).¹³⁰ This miraculous transfer of knowledge is something we confront quite often in *Sabbatian* history and it is even said to have been applied to the Baal Shem Tov, who by many accounts was not initially a scholar.¹³¹

On the matter of the great *Sabbatian Aliya* to the Holy Land in 1700-1 the following excerpt will serve to illustrate how some writers of Jewish history later recorded the event:

“In 1701 a number of Eastern European Jews risked all to return to Jerusalem and join the small Jewish community then living in the Holy City in humiliating and dire circumstances.

¹²⁹ Ashkenazi (1701). The work was named ‘*Eshel (Tamarisk) of Avraham*’ after R. Mordechai Ashkenazi’s teacher R. Avraham Rovigo.

¹³⁰ R. Mordechai Ashkenazi allegedly merited to be taught by a *Magid* or *angelic being* which resembled his teacher R. Avraham Rovigo, apparently while his teacher was still alive! See Kahana (2012:602 n. 40).

¹³¹ However, according to the *Kherson Geniza* (recorded in R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:124, Unnumbered document), the Baal Shem Tov openly acknowledged his lack of *Talmudic* scholarship throughout his entire life, so there would not have been a miraculous transfer of *Talmudic* knowledge.

They were led by the great sage and saint Rabbi Yehuda Hachasid. He died almost immediately upon his arrival in Jerusalem, but his followers persisted and built a modest synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem.”¹³²

Notice that there is no reference whatsoever to the *Sabbatian* nature of the *Aliya*, or to the *Sabbatian* affiliation of its “*great sage and saint*”, or the *Sabbatian* character of its synagogue. This *Sabbatian* affiliation was certainly well known at the time because a few years later, in 1705, the mainstream opponents of the *Sabbatians* exposed the hidden *Sabbatian* intent behind the late R. Yehuda Chasid’s large *Aliya*, and his followers were driven out of all leadership positions specifically because of their *Sabbatian* affiliation (Goldish 2018b:515).

This exposure of the hidden *Sabbatian* character of this large new community and their subsequent removal from power, resulted in tremendous upheaval as the Jerusalem *Ashkenazi* population was suddenly reduced to half their number because many of the *Sabbatian* followers then converted to Islam or Christianity while the others returned to Europe.

Recently discovered archival evidence shows that R. Avraham Rovigo’s son had converted to Christianity and was known as Antonio Felice Fiori. Antonio went on to sue the Jewish community of Modena for 12 000 scudi which his late father had donated in an investment venture to benefit the Jews of Palestine (Goldish 2018a:28).

3.5 R. Shlomo Ayllon and R. Moshe Chagiz

Another visitor to R. Avraham Rovigo’s centre in Modena (see section 3.1.1) was the highly respected R. Shlomo Ayllon¹³³ (c.1660-1728) just after the festival of *Shavuot* in 1688. R. Shlomo Ayllon was born in either Thessalonica or Safed. His identification as a *Sabbatian* is undeniable as he had studied under Shabbatai Tzvi’s ideologue, R. Natan of Gaza. He continued to spread those teachings in R. Avraham Rovigo’s home¹³⁴ where he handed over a *Sabbatian Kabbalistic* treatise he had authored

¹³² Online source: <https://www.jewishhistory.org/the-churva-synagogue/>. Retrieved on 29 December 2022.

¹³³ Also known as R. Shlomo Aailon.

¹³⁴ I discuss the nature of this “home” in section 3.1.5.

(Goldish 2018a:33).¹³⁵ R. Shlomo Ayllon and R. Avraham Rovigo maintained postal contact with each other.

R. Shlomo Ayllon was most controversial in that besides being a known *Sabbatian* propagandist, he was also suspected of converting to Islam, as were many other followers of Shabbatai Tzvi. He mixed deeply in the *Sabbatian* circles of Thessalonica led by R. Yosef Philosoph (the one-time father-in-law of Shabbatai Tzvi)¹³⁶ and R. Shlomo Florentin “*who advocated the faith long after Sabbatai’s apostasy and death.*” These two rabbis led the mass conversion of *Sabbatians* to Islam in the 1680s and went on to form the *Donmeh* sect (Goldish 2018b:501).

Despite these blatant *Sabbatian* associations, R. Shlomo Ayllon held prestigious rabbinic positions in both London, where he served as the *Sefaradi* Chief Rabbi, and in Amsterdam where from 1700, he served as rabbi of the Portuguese synagogue.¹³⁷

“[H]is history is closely interwoven with that of Shabbethaism in both the East and the West” (Ginsberg 1906:359).

Upon arrival in Amsterdam, R. Shlomo Ayllon created a stir by authorising and endorsing a primary *Sabbatian* work by R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (see section 2.2.1). Ginzberg (1906:359) suggests it may have been the work entitled *Boker Avraham*.

The *Sabbatian* expositor R. Moshe Chagiz (1671-c.1750) claimed that R. Shlomo Ayllon had married a woman who was still officially married to another man because she had not received her divorce document as required under *Halacha*. The woman then left R. Shlomo Ayllon and married her third spouse “*whose ‘affinity’ seemed holier to this strange sect than the bonds of lawful matrimony*” (Ginsberg 1906:359).¹³⁸

R. Moshe Chagiz also confirms the fact that the prevailing mainstream culture often did not object to open displays of *Sabbatianism*. After R. Shlomo Ayllon was

¹³⁵ This manuscript is held at Jews' College Library, London (Neubauer, Cat. Bodl. Hebr. MSS., No. 125).

¹³⁶ When Shabbatai Tzvi's wife, Sarah, died in 1674, he married Esther (also called Yocheved) Philosoph. Shabbatai Tzvi was married a number of times.

¹³⁷ Ginzberg (1906:359), however, shows that based on his responsa in Ezekiel Katzenellenbogen's *Keneset Yechezkel* (nos. 3 and 5) he does not seem to have been a *Talmudist* of any great standing.

¹³⁸ R. Moshe Chagiz, *Sefer Shever Posheim*, 1714:34.

appointed as rabbi to the prestigious Portuguese (*Sefaradi*) synagogue in Amsterdam, R. Moshe Chagiz wrote:

“When the sages of Israel heard of the matter, they turned a blind eye as if they knew nothing of the matter” (R. Moshe Chagiz, *Sefer Shever Posheim*, 1714:37).

During his rabbinic tenure in Amsterdam, R. Shlomo Ayllon also came to loggerheads over his *Sabbatian* affiliation, with the *Ashkenazi* Chief Rabbi, R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (1656-1718) – known as the *Chacham Tzvi* – who (like R. Moshe Chagiz) was another *Sabbatian* exposé. Eventually, R. Shlomo Ayllon expelled R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi from Amsterdam for voicing his opposition to *Sabbatianism*.

The situation became more complicated when R. Nechemia Chayon (c.1655-c.1730), a “*notorious Shabbethaian*” arrived in Amsterdam (Ginzberg 1906:359). He had studied at Hebron Yeshiva and produced the “*only indisputably Sabbatian work to be printed by the Sabbatians themselves*” (Maciejko 2017:87). R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi already knew R. Nechemia Chayon from Sarajevo twenty years earlier, and was aware that he had been excommunicated for having had *Sabbatian* leanings. He warned the other rabbis that R. Nechemia Chayon was a secret *Sabbatian*. R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi had also seen first-hand, from his time in Thessalonica, the impact the *Sabbatians* had on the Jewish world. R. Moshe Chagiz, who partnered with R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi then suggested that the latter examine the writings of R. Nechemia Chayon, which he did, and duly declared them to be *Sabbatian*. A work in question was entitled *Oz leElo-him* which was “*a notorious heretical tract held to be the work of Sabbatai Tsevi*” (Maciejko 2017:87). The problem was that R. Shlomo Ayllon and R. Nechemia Chayon had sided in support of the work.

This conflict soon escalated to a debacle and took on cultural *Ashkenazi-Sefaradi* lines, with R. Shlomo Ayllon accusing the *Ashkenazim* of interfering with *Sefaradi* autonomy. The *Maamad*, or governing body of the Portuguese synagogue, representing the opinion of their rabbi, R. Sholom Ayllon, declared R. Nechemia Chayon’s books free of the charge of heresy. R. Avraham Rovigo then added his voice in support of R. Nechemia Chayon. Nevertheless, a ban of ex-communication against R. Nechemia Chayon issued by both R. Moshe Chagiz and R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi was in full force.

This impasse drew in the other rabbis of Italy, Germany and Austria. In the meantime, R. Shlomo Ayllon laid charges against R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi before the Amsterdam magistrates:

“Christian scholars were asked to provide expert opinions.
Excommunications and counter-excommunications were issued”
(Maciejko 2017:87).

Both R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi and R. Moshe Chagiz were met with fierce resistance and were attacked in the streets. The Portuguese community came out in total support of R. Nechemia Chayon and this further corroded the *Ashkenazi-Sefaradi* divide in the city.

More than 120 letters are known to have been written in support of one or other of the factions, which shows the degree of theological debate that ensued at the time. Even an intervention by the much-respected Italian rabbi, Leon Brieli of Mantua, known as the *Maharil*, failed to calm the situation. Although he was greatly respected by the *Sefaradi* community of Amsterdam because of his learning, he sided with R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi and R. Moshe Chagiz, against R. Shlomo Ayllon and R. Nechemia Chayon, and agreed that the latter’s work should remain suppressed.

R. Nechemia Chayon, donning the garb of a traditional *Kabbalist* and denying his *Sabbatian* leanings, counter-charged R. Leon Brieli for being an opponent to Jewish mysticism in general and for denying that R. Shimon bar Yochai had written the *Zohar*.¹³⁹ He even chastised R. Leon Brieli for not growing a beard – something the mystics considered to be very important (Ginsberg and Broydé 1906:385).

The following is an extract from R. Nechemia Chayon’s controversial work *Oz leElo-him*:

“As you can see, it is permissible to study the Torah of truth [i.e., Kabbalah], and to investigate, even if errors will be made. This stands in opposition to those with hearts of stone who are mistaken in their beliefs and do not wish to investigate or to expound issues of Kabbalah beyond what is found in books, fearing that they will make mistakes... Someone who refrains from investigation will be unable to attain true understanding of God’s holiness...And if mistakes are

¹³⁹ See “*Zohar*” in section 1.8.1 (Terminologies).

made—he will receive a reward even for the errors...” (R. Nechemia Chayon, *Oz leElo-him*, 1713, fols. 1r–5r).¹⁴⁰

Ginsberg (1906:360) suggests that later, in 1718, when it came to R. Shlomo Ayllon’s attention that R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi had passed away, he admitted he had acted incorrectly and thereafter refused to meet with R. Nechemia Chayon whose *Sabbatian* writings had created such a stir in the first place.

The climate and tension within the Jewish community after the passing of Shabbatai Tzvi and in the early years of the Baal Shem Tov is described by Natascia Danieli (n.d.:100):

“After the Shabbatean storm had subsided, the struggle continued clandestinely...While all of these developments mainly took place in a twilight or underground atmosphere and received little general attention, from time to time the struggle would resurface. The most famous dispute in Europe was that of the opposition to Nehemiah Hiyya Hayon...”

The Amsterdam episode interlocks well with this study’s *literature and personalities approach* because the conflict was both about *literature* and *personalities*. Pointedly, attempts to spread *Sabbatian literature* by numerous respected rabbinic *personalities* in powerful positions occurred in important segments of the Jewish world even during the lifetime of the Baal Shem Tov – considering that R. Nechemia Chayon arrived in Amsterdam as late as June 1713. *Sabbatians* and *Sabbatianism* had certainly not dissipated even well into the eighteenth century – the *Chassidic* century.

3.6 What type of operation was R. Avraham Rovigo running?

I notice the difference between how Goldish and Tishby refer to the structure of the activity in R. Avraham Rovigo’s ‘house.’ Goldish (2018a:25) uses the benign expression of a ‘home,’ while Tishby (1957a:21) uses the formal designation ‘*Beit Midrash*’ (*House of Study*) which carries with it much more weight in so far as traditional Judaism is concerned. Tishby emphasises that what was going on in Modena was not just a loose gathering of like-minded personalities operating out of a

¹⁴⁰ Translated by Shalom Berger and Avi Staiman of the Academic Language Experts team (Maciejko 2017:100). Square brackets are mine.

house, but rather a well-entrenched, communally integrated and officially designated structure – akin to any other traditional *yeshiva* or *Beit Midrash*. It also had an organisational and outreach branch. Even the anti-*Sabbatian* activist, R. Yakov Sasportas, who was living in Livorno at that stage, admired R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter, known as the ‘*Magid of Modena*,’ as a rabbi of *communal* standing (see section 3.1.2). Also, after R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter left Modena, another *Magid* took his place in the *Beit-Midrash*, namely, R. Mordechai Ashkenazi (Tishby 1957a:III), indicating a sense of continuity in this institution, even if it was situated in a ‘*house*.’ And it seems likely that R. Shlomo Ayllon not only handed over his *Sabbatian* manuscript but authored it, in the same ‘*house*’ as well (see section 3.1.4). Another indication that this was more of an official *Beit Midrash* than a house, is that R. Avraham Rovigo was later to establish another allied formal institution, a *yeshiva* in Jerusalem after his *Aliya* to the Holy Land (see section 3.1.3).

No one is quite sure why R. Avraham Rovigo kept a logbook of all his visitors although it seems that his main concern was the documentation of *Sabbatian* affiliates:

“Rovigo was an enthusiastic supporter of Torah scholarship, Jewish settlement in Palestine, Kabbalah, and especially the underground network of Sabbatean believers” (Goldish 2018a:27).

Over a period of about sixteen years, he made 42 entries to his logbook. Of particular interest to us are the five visitors who were overt *Sabbatian* travelling preachers spreading their mystical and messianic ideology in the belief that Shabbatai Tzvi would soon rise from the dead and herald the final redemption. The true number of *Sabbatians* who visited and consulted with R. Avraham Rovigo is not clear as many kept their affiliations secret. By that stage, during the late seventeenth century, *Sabbatian* ideology had moved from the mainstream position it held in around 1665/6 to one where it was officially regarded as a form of Jewish heresy. Nevertheless, even at that time, about 18 of the 42 visitors were known to have had at least some *Sabbatian* leanings (Goldish 2018a:31).

“The picture that emerges from Rovigo’s list of visitors is that he was part of a large, complex network of learned Jews” (Goldish 2018a:34).

One visitor was a *Baal Shem* or *mystical healer* (see section 2.4.2) from Poland who did a healing ceremony in R. Avraham Rovigo's home. R. Ephraim Cohen of Ostrov also visited. He was a *Sabbatian* who had studied at the yeshivah of R. Yitzchak Yahya in Thessalonica, a prominent *Sabbatian* ideologue. Around the Festival of *Chanukah* in 1685, R. Eliezer Tatz, an emissary from Jerusalem and a *Sabbatian* preacher, also visited him:

“Rovigo...says that he shared all his Sabbatean secrets with Tatz, who left his home full of joy” (Goldish 2018a:32).

Another visitor who was recorded in R. Avraham Rovigo's log was R. Yehuda haCohen, who was an avowed *Sabbatian*.¹⁴¹ R. Yehuda haCohen sold a work by R. Natan of Gaza, entitled *Derush haTaninim* to R. Avraham Rovigo and accompanied him on his *Aliya* to the Holy Land.

R. Avraham Rovigo, who claimed he had a new reading of the *Zohar* which he had received from heaven, emerges as a primary conduit – sometimes noticed but most times unobserved – through which *Sabbatian* ideology, particularly from the school of R. Natan of Gaza, was disseminated.

“[In his home]¹⁴² information, texts, and theological ideas were exchanged and passed along through Rovigo to the entire Sabbatean network...Rovigo's home and visitors' list constitute primary evidence for the shift of the Sabbatean center from the Ottoman Empire to the European continent in the period after Sabbatai's death in 1676” (Goldish 2018a:36-37).

The information gleaned from this logbook serves to emphasise just how difficult it was to know who represented mainstream Judaism and who was secretly attempting to subvert it from within. These influential secret *Sabbatians* in powerful rabbinic leadership positions were not supposed to have existed in a world where Shabbatai Tzvi was officially gone and forgotten. But this was the reality of the mystical world of secret travelling *Sabbatian* preachers, fundraisers, healers and rabbis into which the Baal Shem was born, at least fourteen years *before* R. Avraham Rovigo had passed

¹⁴¹ R. Yehuda haCohen, ironically, was uncle of the anti-*Sabbatian* *Ashkenazi* Chief Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, who was the father of the *Sabbatian* exposé, R. Yakov Emden.

¹⁴² Square brackets are mine.

away. The members of this group who studied under R. Avraham Rovigo were even known as ‘*Chassidim*,’ and according to an eyewitness account by R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen (1691–1765),¹⁴³ this group included “*their most learned and ascetic*” (Kahana 2012:601).¹⁴⁴

3.7 R. Yehuda Leib (Leibele) Prossnitz

R. Leibele Prossnitz’s (c.1670-1730) original name was Yehudah Leib ben Yaakov Holleschau, but he adopted the name ‘Prossnitz’ after the town from where his wife’s family came and in which he later settled. At that time Prossnitz (Prostějov) had the second-largest Jewish community in Moravia and was known as the ‘Jerusalem of the Hana (Plains).’ Yet, this large community of Prossnitz was an acknowledged hub of *Sabbatian* activity. Even in the vernacular, its inhabitants were known as ‘*Schepsen*’ (corrupted from Shabbatai Tzvi).¹⁴⁵ Although R. Leibele Prossnitz was eventually excommunicated from Prossnitz, the “*Sabbatian circle he founded in Prossnitz persisted clandestinely throughout the eighteenth century*” (Ada Rapoport-Albert 2010:n.p.). This is yet another indication of the persistence of *Sabbatianism* well into the eighteenth century.

R. Leibele Prossnitz had probably been influenced by R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref (see section 4.7), R. Yehuda Chasid and R. Chaim Malach (see section 3.1.3) who had visited the area. In around 1700, at the age of thirty, R. Leibele Prossnitz claimed that he had learned *Kabbalah* from the departed souls of his ‘teachers,’ R. Yitzchak Luria (d. 1572) and Shabbatai Tzvi (d. 1676). He later moved into the *Beit Midrash* (House of Study) of Prossnitz and, adopting the style of a *Mochiach* (rebuking preacher), he began to sprout mysticism, attracting a large following – including R. Meir Eisenstadt (see section 3.1.2) who had served as the rabbi of Prossnitz since 1702 (Ada Rapoport-Albert 2010:n.p.).

¹⁴³ R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen was a respected mainstream rabbi who was caught up in the allure of *Sabbatian* mysticism but he was not a *Sabbatian* and did not believe Shabbatai Tzvi was the Messiah (Kahana 2012:604).

¹⁴⁴ The term *Chassidim* was used by R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen in his will, entitled *Yesh Manchilin* (There Are Those Who Bequeath) where he describes his early memories of meeting both R. Avraham Rovigo and his student R. Mordechai Ashkenazi. R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen’s father had served under R. Avraham Rovigo, making this a reliable attestation that Rovigo’s followers were called *Chassidim*.

¹⁴⁵ Prossnitz was, somehow, always associated with forms of antinomianism, and even a hundred years later, it became a centre for *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) and Reform.

Additionally, the highly respected and acclaimed R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz (see section 3.1.7), a student (and the adopted son) of R. Meir Eisenstadt (Ada Rapoport-Albert 2010:n.p.) also began to study in secret with R. Leibele Prossnitz “*who was then propagating teachings close to the radical wing of Shabbateanism*” (Scholem 1972a:col.1241). This paints R. Leibele Prossnitz as an influential and more radical *Sabbatian*.

The *Sabbatian* exposé, R. Yakov Emden writes:

“Assorted strange letters of correspondence with the wicked heretics of the sect of Sabbatai Tsevi, may his name be obliterated, were found in his [Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschütz’s] possession. In particular, he corresponded with the accursed Liebele Prossnitz...Although they [the mainstream rabbis] initially attacked him [Liebele Prossnitz] with the sword of excommunication, intending to destroy him; they then accepted his patently false apology...At that point, the spirit of the rabbis who were pursuing him softened...[and]¹⁴⁶ they forgave him that time, and hid him like the night...” (R. Yakov Emden, *Igeret Purim*,¹⁴⁷ 1715:n.p.).¹⁴⁸

Scholem maintains that there is “*no conclusive proof*” for R. Yakov Emden’s claim that R. Leibele Prossnitz saw R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz as the future leader of the *Sabbatians*, although Ada Rapoport-Albert (2010:n.p.) implies that this may have been the case. In 1774, R. Leibele Prossnitz claimed he was *Mashiach ben Yosef* and he then changed his name to Yosef ben Yaakov. He said he had destroyed the reign of the ‘evil force’ known as *Samael* and was involved in some form of ritual where he sacrificed a chicken to that end (Scholem 1972a:col.1241).

Although it was originally believed that R. Leibele Prossnitz left no writings, from as recently as the 1970s his authorship was ascribed to two *Kabbalistic* works, *Tzadik Yesod Olam* and *Raza deAtvin*¹⁴⁹ *Gelifin*. Astoundingly, these works had hitherto been

¹⁴⁶ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁴⁷ The Jewish festival of “*Purim*” has the same numerical value (336) as R. Emden’s name, “*Yaakov ben Tzvi*.”

¹⁴⁸ MS Mich. 618 (Neubauer no. 2109), Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Translated by Shalom Berger and Avi Staiman of the Academic Language Experts team (Maciejko 2017:123).

¹⁴⁹ Liebes (1993:173 n.61) has it as *De-Atvan*.

thought to have been written by R. Yitzchak Luria “*without their evident Sabbatian import ever being recognized*” (Ada Rapoport-Albert 2010). Liebes (1993:103) is more forthright and he writes:

“Tsaddik Yesod Olam had been attributed to Luria whereas I later found it had been written by the Sabbatean prophet R. Leibele Prossnitz.”

This indicates that R. Leibele Prossnitz was able to produce work of a high standard if his writing was mistaken for that of R. Yitzchak Luria. Liebes (1993:195, footnote 56) notes the “*terminological continuity*” between R. Leibele Prossnitz and later *Chassidic* literature. If Liebes is correct, then R. Leibele Prossnitz emerges as another conduit between *Sabbatian* ideology and *Chassidism*. Liebes also observes that the great *Chassidic Rebbe*, R. Nachman of Breslov’s opponents claimed that his disciple – probably referring to his main student and scribe, R. Natan Sternharz (1780-1844) – was a great-grandson of R. Leibele Prossnitz.¹⁵⁰

3.8 Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy

The great *Sabbatian* expositor, R. Yakov Emden (1697-1776), also known as Yavetz,¹⁵¹ was the son of R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (see section 3.1.4) and is considered to be one of the leading rabbinical figures of the eighteenth century. During the last twenty-five years of his life, he “*fully devoted himself to exposing and hounding all vestiges of the [Sabbatian]¹⁵² movement*” (Schacter 2011:72). However, he became extremely unpopular when he accused his esteemed colleague, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz of Prague – another towering rabbinical figure who was also regarded as “*one of the greatest rabbis of the generation*” – of being a secret follower of Shabbatai Tzvi (Schacter 2012:361).

R. Yakov Emden went so far as to accuse R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz of all sorts of antinomian behaviour, including incest, by fathering a child with his own

¹⁵⁰ See section 5.3.2.

¹⁵¹ **Yavetz** = **Yakov ben Tzvi**. The family name Jawitz derives from Yavetz.

¹⁵² Square brackets are mine.

daughter.¹⁵³ In his *Igeret Shum*,¹⁵⁴ R. Yakov Emden became so enraged with R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz that he drops all honorifics and even changes his first name to the less-respectful “*Yonatan*” instead of “*Yehonatan*” and simply refers to him as “*Eibescheutzer*,” even “*Katan (the insignificant) Yonatan Eibesschuetz*” (which in Hebrew becomes an acronym כק”א or *bile*) (Maciejko n.d.:60).¹⁵⁵

Earlier on, R. Yakov Emden had become acutely suspicious of R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz who had distributed, what he (Emden) considered to be *Sabbatian Segulot* or *Kamiot* (amulets) which tied him to the secret *Sabbatian* group. The amulets were said to ward off ‘evil spirits,’ especially from pregnant women. On February 4, 1751, in a synagogue situated in his home in Altona, R. Yakov Emden declared that certain amulets distributed by R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz had *Sabbatian* content (Leiman 1989:179). He had been shown a recent amulet written by R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz while the latter had been serving as a rabbi in Hamburg, Germany.

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz was greatly revered and had a huge following. As a result of R. Yakov Emden’s audacious accusation, physical violence soon erupted in the streets to the extent that the authorities had to intervene. Notwithstanding the severity of the allegations against him, the majority of the Jewish community stood behind R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz. The community was ordered by the rabbinate, under threat of ex-communication, to refrain from attending R. Yakov Emden’s synagogue. His very life was under threat and he was forced to seek refuge in Amsterdam. Eventually, the Danish king intervened and he returned to his home on the condition that he would halt his attacks on R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz.

By a strange turn of events, R. Yakov Emden’s story mimicked that of his father, R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, who was also persecuted by the *Sabbatians* (see section 3.1.4). This highlights how deeply *Sabbatian* influence was entrenched within Jewish communities and how ruthlessly they attacked all those considered to be adversaries – and their vehemence was intergenerational:

¹⁵³ This allegation is recorded in R. Yakov Emden’s autobiographical book *Megilat Sefer*. It was written between 1752 and 1766 and remained in manuscript form for about one hundred and thirty years until it was found at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and only published in 1896 by David Kahane. It is probably the frankest, most brutally honest “*and unself-conscious egodocuments in Jewish and even general history*” (Schacter 2011:72). For more allegations against R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz see Maciejko (n.d.:62-63).

¹⁵⁴ R. Yakov Emden, *Igeret Shum*, 1756:47r.

¹⁵⁵ I thank Professor Maciejko for his kind permission to use these sources.

“[T]he incident [which occurred to] my revered father...is identical to that which befell me in the incident of the abominable Eibeschuetz, may the name of the wicked rot (Prov. 10:7). They are precisely equivalent. What happened to the father happened to the son” (R. Yakov Emden, *Megilat Sefer*, 1896:130b).¹⁵⁶

R. Yakov Emden was placed under house arrest, the synagogue in which he had served for twenty years was shut down, and he was told to leave Altona within six months. R. Yakov Emden appealed for assistance from R. Shmuel Hilman of Metz, who had also long suspected R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz as being a secret *Sabbatian*. R. Shmuel Hilman began to gather all the amulets he could find that were written by R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz. He took the precaution of having five samples of his collection of amulets duly notarised by the two official notaries of the Jewish community of Metz. These two notaries happened to be strong supporters of R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz but they still performed their legal task objectively. It was important to notarise these amulets because it soon became evident that this matter would never be settled in a *Beit Din* (a Jewish ecclesiastical court), but only in a civil court. R. Shmuel Hilman writes:

“We examined many of his amulets; all of them are Sabbatian in Character...Let them ask Eibeschuetz to explain them immediately when shown to him, without providing him time to provide a contrived answer” (R. Yakov Emden, *Edut beYakov*, 1756:31a-b).¹⁵⁷

Not only were these notarised copies sent in communications to leading rabbis around the world, but they even appeared in one publication on a fold-out page.¹⁵⁸

This conflict soon turned into one of the fiercest rabbinic controversies for three hundred years (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:232-236). To emphasise the vast

¹⁵⁶ Translated by Schacter (2011:76).

¹⁵⁷ Translated by Leiman and Schwarzfuchs (2006:235). The translators note that this is paraphrase rather than a direct translation because the original is an excessively ornate rabbinical Hebrew.

¹⁵⁸ *Sefat Emet veLashon Zehorit*, unknown author (perhaps Yakov Emden?), (Amsterdam?) 1752, n.p. (or pp. 37-38 according to the Jerusalem 1971 photomechanical reproduction). Leiman and Schwarzfuchs (2006:234) suggest that the author may not have been R. Yakov Emden but Nechemia Reischer, a one-time supporter of R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz who moved over to the Emden camp.

scope of the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy, the anti-Eibeschuetz camp was drawn from:

“the Chief Rabbis of the largest, wealthiest, and most important communities in Ashkenaz: Frankfurt am Main, Metz and the province of Lorraine, Amsterdam, Fürth, Berlin, Hannover, Schwabach, and Glogau. The coalition was also supported by the chief rabbi of Lwów in Poland as well as the rabbis of Venice, Italy” (Maciejko n.d.:79-80).

On the other side, the pro-Eibeschuetz camp included:

“hundreds of rabbis and Jewish elders from East and Central Europe, many of them former students of Eibeschütz. All major Moravian and many Bohemian, Silesian, and Hungarian communities were adamantly pro-Eibeschütz. So was Vienna. Rabbis and elders of Lublin, Kraków, Poznań in Poland as well as Vilna and Mir in Lithuania provided backing to Rabbi Jonathan... A little later, the rabbis of Constantinople and Jerusalem sent words of support for Eibeschütz” (Maciejko n.d.:79-80).

The situation became more complicated because R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz also happened to be the Chief Rabbi of the Triple Communities of Altona, Hamburg and Wandsbeck,¹⁵⁹ and he had close connections to the Danish king Frederick V. R. Yakov Emden, in turn, put pressure on the king to question R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz about alleged voting irregularities relating to his election as Chief Rabbi. R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz had previously served as the Chief Rabbi of Metz. Around 1743, during his tenure in Metz, he was widely recognised as a *Baal Shem* and one of his duties was to write and sell amulets (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:233).

The controversy turned uglier when R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, as feared, refused to appear before a *Beit Din* and instead chose to go to the civil courts. R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz appointed a former pupil, Karl Anton (previously known as Gershon Moshe Cohen) who had converted to Christianity, to represent him.

In recent research, the original notarised copy of the five amulets (not, however, the original amulets themselves) – discovered accidentally by Jean Fleury, who did

¹⁵⁹ He assumed this position in 1750.

not know what they were – have been identified by Sid Leiman and Simon Schwarzfuchs as the official copies of amulets written by R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz while he was the Chief Rabbi of Metz. The research reveals that no less than the king's attorney general was tasked with obtaining the notarised copies of the questionable amulets from the officials of the Jewish community of Metz (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:230). These documents allow for a fresh assessment of the original claims of both parties to the conflict.

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz had challenged the authenticity of the notarised transcriptions as they appeared in the communications distributed by R. Shmuel Hilman and in the fold-out print publication. However, with the accidental discovery of the original notarised document, Leiman and Schwarzfuchs had a golden opportunity to test R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz's allegations of text tampering in the publicised documents. Their findings were that since some printing errors were already corrected in the corrigenda which appeared at the back of the printed volume of *Sefat Emet*:

“the differences between the recovered original text and the printed version are negligible...[and] for all intents and purpose, a perfect replica of the original [notarised] document” (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:241).¹⁶⁰

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz only officially responded to these published allegations against him after being removed from office by R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk (1680-1756) also known as the *Penei Yehoshua*, the Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt. At first, R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk tried to make peace and give R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz a chance to ‘repent’:

“Falk stated that Rabbi Jonathan would not be the first great rabbi to make ‘that mistake’ of believing in Sabbatai Tsevi” (Maciejko: n.d.:11).

However, soon R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk led the anti-Eibeschuetz camp by forming a united front of German rabbis. R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz presented a single rejoinder proclaiming his innocence in his *Luchot Edut*, published in Altona in 1755:

עב"פ יכירו כל העולם שהכל מתחילה ועד סוף נעשה בהכרח ואונס

¹⁶⁰ Square brackets are mine.

“At least the whole world will recognise that everything [relating to the notaries] from the beginning to the end, was done under duress and force” (Eibeschuetz 1755:16b).¹⁶¹

Pawel Maciejko (n.d.:3) points out that:

“Never before had the amulets of a recognized master of esoteric lore been opened and interpreted for the pleasure of the crowd.”

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz claimed that the notaries were *forced* to copy the five amulets. R. Yakov Emden responded that they were indeed ordered by the Chief Rabbi and the officials of the Jewish Council of Metz to notarise the documents but they did so truthfully and accurately. Indeed, one of the signatories, Mordechai Gumprecht, even writes:

“I have heard that my master and Rabbi [R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz] was angry at me for signing the amulets...surely he knows that I am the notary of the Jewish community [of Metz]. Whatever they order me to do, I must do.”¹⁶²

Eventually:

“Eibeschuetz admitted he had written them, but he vigorously denied their Sabbatian character” (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:242).

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz claimed that at the time he wrote the amulets, he was suffering from eye problems and additionally he was not proficient in the square script of the Hebrew letters. He also claimed that since these amulets were worn on the body, some of the writings would have been distorted and now represented something other than what he originally intended.

R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk points out that when one tallies all the ‘distorted’ Hebrew characters as specified in R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz’s rejoinder, *Luchot Edut*, they amount to just a few; and to the contrary:

¹⁶¹ Translation and square brackets are mine. This specific correspondence is dated November 20, 1751.

¹⁶² From a letter sent by Mordechai Gumprecht to a student in Hamburg, named Leib Pressburg. This segment is included in another unpublished letter by Mordechai Gumprecht (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:239).

“they prove that, for the most part, the notarized Metz amulets accurately reflect what Eibeschuetz wrote. By Eibeschuetz’ own admission...[the notaries] neither added nor subtracted from the original texts written by Eibeschuetz” (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:242).¹⁶³

And all this was only with regard to *one* of the five notarised amulets. Although R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk requested explanations for all the amulets, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz only dealt comprehensively with one of them, explaining that he did not want to expose more secrets of *Kabbalah* than necessary. Additionally:

“He selected for commentary the one Metz amulet that had an outer seal without an inner text. The other four amulets had both outer seals and inner seals” (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:243 n.43).

It would have been difficult for him to challenge the representations of the double-sealed documents. R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz also censured his prosecutors for reading the writing as one continuous text which became a “*prayer addressed to God, with mention of His Messiah Shabbetai Zev*” (Leiman and Schwarzfuchs 2006:243 n.43). Instead, he claimed that the text must be read as a disconnect of various unrelated holy names of God. His detractors, he said, were simply ignorant of the technicalities of *Kabbalah*.

One should, however, bear in mind Maciejko’s description of the “*Eibeschützian idiom*” where he colourfully defines R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz’s writing style as:

“the literary equivalent of a Rube Goldberg device¹⁶⁴ ...full of bells, whistles, far-fetched associations, allusions to obscure rabbinic adages, misquoted biblical verses, and broken metaphors” (Maciejko n.d.:1).

In the final analysis, although there does seem to be overwhelming support in favour of R. Yakov Emden, R. Shmuel Hilman and R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk, the weak link lies between the original amulets and the original copy of the notarised amulets. Even though R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz acknowledged that nothing was added to, or

¹⁶³ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁶⁴ So named after Reuben Goldberg the engineer, inventor and cartoonist who designed extremely and superfluously complicated mechanical systems to perform simple tasks.

subtracted from, the original text – only the discovery of the original amulets will resolve this matter conclusively. And I would imagine that even then, hypothetically they would have to be in their pristine form, otherwise, some would claim that age, wear and tear distorted their original intent.

Notwithstanding all these legal expedencies, contemporaneous common accounts during R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz's time, seamlessly linked him to *Sabbatianism*:

“[He] was perceived as a major Sabbatian teacher by his fellows and students in the Great Yeshiva in Prague...many of his students ...returned to Podolia and Galicia, where they taught oral and written Sabbatian teachings that were ascribed to him” (Elior 2012:90).¹⁶⁵

Along similar lines:

“[p]ublic and private accusations of Sabbatianism had surrounded him since the 1720s...[and] Eibeschütz did not explicitly deny the Sabbatian belief. He merely asked his students a series of rhetorical questions: ‘Have you ever heard me saying that Sabbatai Tsevi was the Messiah?’; ‘Have you ever seen me engage in any heterodox practice?’; ‘Did I ever profess any non-normative doctrine?’” (Maciejko n.d.:5).

However, in his *Beit Yehonatan haSofer*, R. Yakov Emden (1762/3) had collected one hundred and fifty-nine testimonies, many from R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz's students, and:

“quite a few people would answer ‘Yes’ to the questions about Eibeschütz ever making positive statements about Sabbatai Tsevi or engaging in practices that could not be reconciled with normative Judaism” (Maciejko n.d.:6).

Joseph Prager's *Gahalei Esh*¹⁶⁶ records a case as early as around 1720 of a repentant *Sabbatian* from Zlotchov (Złoczów), who appeared before R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk when the latter was the Chief Rabbi of Lvov. The one-time *Sabbatian* claimed that his

¹⁶⁵ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁶⁶ Joseph Prager, *Gahalei Esh*, Oxford, Bodleian Library. Ms. Michael 106-108 (Neubauer 2189), I 70r.

teacher, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, was “*the head of them all*” (i.e. the *Sabbatians*) and that he had interpreted sections of the *Zohar* as referring to Shabbatai Tzvi (Maciejko n.d.:14).

Maciejko (n.d.:24) describes two strange sets of correspondence between R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk and R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz – each meant for the other but neither party physically sent their letter to their opponent. In what has become known as the *Final Warning*, R. Yakov Yehoshua Falk’s letter was printed and publicised before being sent to R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz. In turn, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz responded very harshly in a letter that he claimed he ‘forgot’ to send, and had left on a table in front of all his students who duly copied and publicised it.¹⁶⁷

In one part of his letter, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz quotes a verse from Hosea 14:10 which reads:

כִּי־יֵשׁׁרִים דְּרָכַי יְהוָה וְצַדִּיקִים יֵלְכוּ בָם

“For the paths of the Lord are straight, the righteous can walk in them...”

However, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz changed the word בם (them) to בו (him) and changed the word order to read וְצַדִּיקִים בּוֹ יֵלְכוּ (and the righteous can walk in *his* ways). Maciejko notes that “*the alteration of the Biblical verse is too specific and consistent to be coincidental,*” and they form an acronym for the name צבי (Tzvi):

“Sabbatians were fond of quoting biblical passages whose acronyms might have been understood as hinting at the name Tsevi (their favorite being Habakkuk 2:4 **t**saddik **b**e-emunato **y**ihyeh [=**Tzvi**], ‘the just shall live by his faith’)” (Maciejko n.d.:34-5).¹⁶⁸

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz was fond of quoting “*Tzvi*.” At the conclusion of his first address that he delivered in the Altona synagogue immediately after the controversy broke out, he announced that the righteous will meet in the Holy Land and “*the stag (tzvi) will walk in front of them*” (Emden 1886:22r).

¹⁶⁷ There were four versions of R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz’s response, but Maciejko relies on the only extant manuscript copy as found in *Seder Nezikin* [Bodleian Library, Ms. Michael 529 (Neubauer 2229/5), 211v -212r].

¹⁶⁸ Square brackets are mine.

In the end, the entire Emden-Eibeschetz debacle involved so many rabbis and so much writing, and revealed the extent of the fault lines and tensions that came to exemplify the mid-eighteenth century with its saturation with all forms of *Sabbatianism* – yet “[d]espite the overwhelming evidence”, writes Maciejko (n.d.:89), “*Eibeschetz’s heresy was to be swept under the carpet.*”

Sabbatian books ascribed to R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz were banned in Prague in 1726 and Brody, in Galicia on the Podolian border, in 1751. R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz had a son, Wolf (see section 3.1.8) who, around 1759, openly declared himself to be a follower of Shabbetai Tzvi (Leiman 1989:184). As a result of this devastating blow, R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz’s *yeshiva* was eventually closed down, never to open again. In a great irony of history, both R. Yakov Emden and R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz were later to be buried in close proximity to each other.

The Emden-Eibeschetz controversy is significant to our investigation because it took place during the lifetime of the Baal Shem Tov. It underscores the reality of *Sabbatian* saturation within the religious society of that important era. R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz was:

“excommunicated in the last decade of the life of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, who was active in the same geographical region during the same period” (Elior 2012:90).

Notwithstanding all this, R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz is still commonly cited today as an authoritative *Halachic* source in both the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* camps. There is even a *Chassidic* tradition, which I heard from a close associate of the *Belzer Rebbe*, R. Yissachar Dov Rokeach (b. 1948), that R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz was one of only seven special *Rebbes*¹⁶⁹ to have acquired the illustrious double honorific of ‘*Rebbe Reb.*’ The other six were all official *Chassidic Rebbes*. These examples of veneration and respect show the high esteem in which R. Yehonatan Eibeschetz is *still* regarded within *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* circles.

¹⁶⁹ Even though he was not a *Chassidic Rebbe*.

3.9 R. Wolf, son of R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz

R. Wolf Eibeschuetz seemed to confirm all the accusations of *Sabbatianism* that were levelled against his father, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz. As a young man, he travelled, incurred debts and had to return to his home in Altona. Within a short time, however, he was able to purchase one of the most expensive properties in Altona. R. Yakov Emden describes his new lavish lifestyle which, surprising for a rabbi, had some overt Christian imagery:

“In the garden he...placed costly sculptures of marble and alabaster, statuettes of [the Virgin] feeding the child and of other known [Christian] saints. And he had a great chronograph [keli shaot]...which was decorated with the images of all the deeds of Jesus [kol ma’ase talui]” (Emden 1877:19v).¹⁷⁰

Yet, in this house, R. Wolf Eibeschuetz established a study centre or *Beit Midrash*:

“and the house of study came to be regarded an almost open centre of heretical Sabbatianism” (Maciejko 2010a:363).

He soon incurred more debts, and his mansion and art collection had to be auctioned off. When prospective buyers came to view the home, they found among the items, a *Sabbatian* manuscript that read like a manifesto. When the rabbis were made aware of this finding, they put pressure on his father, then Chief Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, to expel him from the city. R. Wolf Eibeschuetz moved to Moravia where he “re-established contacts with the Sabbatian network in Brünn, Prossnitz and Holleschau” (Maciejko 2010a:364).

Popular opinion among both Jews and Christians was that R. Wolf Eibeschuetz had converted to Christianity to obtain the title of Baron, but Maciejko (2010a:365) maintains that he “decided to remain faithful to Judaism and never collected the writ of nobility.” Either way, Maciejko (2010a:373) considers R. Wolf Eibeschuetz to have been one of the “two most prominent Sabbatian leaders in East-Central Europe.” The other was Jacob Frank, the leader of the *Sabbatian* sister movement, *Frankism*.

¹⁷⁰ Translation is by Maciejko (2010a:363).

3.10 Radical anti-*Sabbatianism* of R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi and his son, R. Yakov Emden

The somewhat neglected study of what Jacob Schacter (2001:1) describes as “*radical anti-Sabbatianism*” is of interest to this investigation because, tangentially, it exposes the degree of saturation of *Sabbatianism* not only in general society but also within individual family units themselves. Many families were torn apart by members who were either distinctly pro or anti-*Sabbatianism*. Some examples follow:

The great *Sabbatian* ideologue R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (see section 2.2) had a brother, R. Yitzchak Cardozo (1603/4-1683), who was an opponent of *Sabbatianism*. R. Moshe Chagiz (see section 3.1.4) was a leading *Sabbatian* exposé, yet his grandfather R. Moshe Galante (1620-1689) had been an active *Sabbatian* in a leadership position. R. David Yizhaki (c.1615-1694), also a prominent *Sabbatian*, had a son, R. Abraham Yizhaki (1661-1729) who fought against *Sabbatianism*. R. Moses Pinheiro (d. 1689) was a key *Sabbatian* in the early days of the movement, and his grandson, R. Joseph Ergas (1685-1730) was a prominent anti-*Sabbatian* (Schacter 2001:6).

R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, who was expelled from Amsterdam by R. Shlomo Ayllon (see section 3.1.4) had many points of contact with *Sabbatians*, including within his own close family. His mother's brother, R. Yehuda haCohen was a known *Sabbatian*. He was the son of R. Efraim haCohen, the respected rabbinic authority who authored Responsa literature (*Efraim haCohen* 1915). Yet, R. Yehuda haCohen had visited R. Avraham Rovigo and later joined him on the *Sabbatian Aliya* at around 1701-2 and studied in his *Sabbatian yeshiva* in Jerusalem (see sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.3).¹⁷¹ R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi had been very close to his uncle so he would have been aware of his *Sabbatian* affiliations. Schacter (2001:14) suggests that the knowledge that his own uncle was a *Sabbatian*, drove R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi to express strong opposition to *Sabbatianism*.

¹⁷¹ When R. Yehuda haCohen's grandnephew, R. Yakov Emden, recorded his death, he wrote that his granduncle had died with a “*shem tov*,” a *good name* (Emden, *Megilat Sefer*, 1896:4). This implies that R. Yehuda haCohen had, at some stage, left *Sabbatianism* and returned to mainstream Judaism (Schacter 2001:14).

But R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi's relationships with *Sabbatians* go even deeper because his father, R. Yakov Zak, may also have been a *Sabbatian*.¹⁷² The evidence for this is found in a pamphlet, entitled *haTzad Tzvi* that R. Nechemia Chayon wrote during the controversies between R. Shlomo Ayllon and R. Moshe Chagiz (see section 3.1.4):¹⁷³

“[R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi] is the son of the firm believer in Shabbetai Zevi...It was he who caused a Jew to die for refusing to make a *mi she-berakh* [i.e., a blessing]¹⁷⁴ in the synagogue for the life of Shabbetai Zevi. He ruled that this constituted a rebellion against the kingdom of the house of David and permitted the blood of that Jew [to be shed]. There are witnesses here who can corroborate this fact” (R. Nechemia Chayon, *haTzad Tzvi*, 1714:2b-3a).¹⁷⁵

While it is reasonable to suspect the authenticity of a source coming from a protagonist in the midst of a huge controversy, Schacter, nevertheless, puts forward an interesting argument to support its trustworthiness. He suggests that the main issue is not the allegation of *Sabbatianism* levelled against R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi's father. Instead, Schacter understands the main thrust of R. Nechemia Chayon's allegation to be the “*callous disregard for the sanctity of human life*” exhibited by R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi's father. That dangerous character flaw is reflected in his son, who would stop at nothing to get his way. The father is portrayed as a fanatical *Sabbatian* and the son is similarly depicted as his polar opposite, a zealous *anti-Sabbatian*. But both father and son are prepared to kill for their beliefs (Schacter 2001:17).

Schacter's reading of the Chayon pamphlet is supported by the claim that witnesses are ready to step up and testify to the zealotry of the father, whose *Sabbatian* affiliations are presented as only being incidental. The 'secondary and incidental accusation' of *Sabbatianism* is what makes the document more believable.

¹⁷² This *Sabbatian* connection has been suggested by the following scholars: Heinrich Graetz, David Kahana, Jecheskiel Caro, Leopold Greenwald, Sandor Buchler, Salomon Rosanes, Aharon Fuerst and Gershom Scholem (Schacter 2001:15).

¹⁷³ It will be remembered that the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam, R. Shlomo Ayllon together with R. Nechemia Chayon were charged with *Sabbatianism* by both R. Moshe Chagiz and R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi.

¹⁷⁴ First two square brackets are mine.

¹⁷⁵ Translation by Schacter (2001:15-16).

Of interest, and perhaps having some bearing on this discussion is Schacter's depiction of the third generation of this same family, R. Yakov Emden, who carried on the role of *Sabbatian* hunter after his father, R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi.

"In the case of Emden, in particular, there is no question that psychological considerations played a major role" (Schacter 2001:5).

Schacter does not say it in so many words but he certainly gives pause to question the psychological health of three generations of this rabbinic family. Joseph Dan (2007:804) refers to R. Yakov Emden as a "*fanatic enemy of Shabbateanism*." Most astounding, though, is Schacter's citing of Yehuda Liebes' (1980:122-165) explanation as to why the grandson, R. Yakov Emden, chose to be such a virulent *anti-Sabbatian*:

"Emden's messianic pretensions for himself as well as for the members of his immediate family were a significant factor (if not the significant factor) in accounting for the extremism of his anti-Sabbatianism" (Schacter 2001:5-6).

On this view, R. Yakov Emden opposed the messianism of Shabbatai Tzvi only because he had his own mission to promote himself as the messianic figure!

Kahana, however, seems to take a more prosaic approach to R. Yakov Emden who he describes as being primarily concerned about the effects of *Sabbatian literature* rather than *Sabbatian personalities*:

"the main purpose of this detective work was not to uncover actual Sabbateans but to battle the widespread impact of the literature" (Kahana 2012:590).

In either event, all this goes to my point of total societal saturation and obsession with *Sabbatian* messianism and mysticism – whether *personalities*, *literature* or both. In some instances, it took the form of *Sabbatianism*, in other instances, anti-*Sabbatianism*. Generally, though, as we have seen, it was the overwhelming effects of *Sabbatianism* that had infiltrated the very fabric of the rabbinic world in which the Baal Shem Tov operated. And just like there was radical anti-*Sabbatianism* as we have seen, there was soon to emerge radical anti-*Chassidism*, in the form of the *Mitnagdic* movement, many of whose leaders like the Vilna Gaon and R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, were mystics themselves (see section 6.3). It would have been very difficult

for any rabbi growing up in that world not to have been influenced in some way, by some form of, or reaction to, *Sabbatianism*.

Yehuda Liebes (2003:13) points out the surprising irony that both R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and R. Yakov Emden were not averse to delving into *Sabbatian* teachings. There was a difference, however, between their methodologies. R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov wanted to ‘redeem’ Shabbatai Tzvi whereas R. Yakov Emden believed the holiness inherent within *Sabbatianism* could only be revealed by total opposition to it. That is why he assumed a messianic mission for himself – to completely remove messianism from Shabbatai Tzvi.

R. Yakov Emden referred to himself as the holy messianic ‘*Nachash*’ (*Snake*) who would defeat the unholy *Nachash* that was Shabbatai Tzvi. *Nachash* has the same numerical value (358) as *Mashiach* (see section 6.4). Liebes (2003:36) thus explains R. Yakov Emden’s personal messianic ambitions far more mystically than Schacter’s and Kahana’s prosaic portrayals.

3.11 Debate surrounding alleged *Sabbatian* leanings of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

Another influential *Kabbalist* who also lived at the same time as the Baal Shem Tov was R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746). He was born in Padua to a wealthy and cultured Italian family and was exposed to languages, including Latin, by his father. He mastered *Talmud* and even *Kabbalah* at an early age under his teachers R. Yeshayahu Bassan¹⁷⁶ (1673-1739) and R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale (1651-1730) who also happened to be R. Yeshayahu Bassan’s father-in-law. R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale had a picture of Shabbatai Tzvi openly hanging in his home and he was the study partner of the *Sabbatian* leader R. Avraham Rovigo (see section 3.1.1).

Later, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto went on to study secular subjects (possibly medicine) at Padua University under R. Yitzchak Chaim Cohen Cantarini. It was there that he selected a group of medical students and together they formed a *Kabbalistic* circle known as *Chevra Mevakshei haShem* (*the Group of Seekers of God*) intending to bring about “*messianic manifestation in global redemption*” (Sclar

¹⁷⁶ Also known as Bassani.

2017:40). As to the question of his messianism, in several of his writings: “Luzzatto identified himself directly as the redeemer” (Carlebach 1987:13).

Although the practice of medicine was different in those days, the irony of religious Italian students of secular science studying *Kabbalah* should not be lost, coupled with the fact that their mystical teacher was clean-shaven,¹⁷⁷ and a bachelor (Werblowsky 1962:134). R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s circle was later bonded together by his followers signing a confidential contract known as a *Shtar Hitkashrut* (*Document of Bonds*) drawn up in January 1731 (Carlebach 1987:5).

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto flourished and was soon to instruct his former teachers. In a letter¹⁷⁸ dated 18 Shevat 5490 (1730), he wrote to his teacher, R. Yeshayahu Bassan, and informed him that he (R. Bassan) was a *Gilgul* (*reincarnation*) of the earlier *Talmudic* sage, Rabbi Akiva (50-135 CE). R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto had become aware of this during a recent mystical experience with a *Magid* (*angelic being*) with whom he claimed he had been in communication for several years. He also considered his own soul to be a *Gilgul* of the biblical Moses (Sclar 2017:39-40).

Elisheva Carlebach (1987:1) points out that the controversy over R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s alleged *Sabbatian* affiliations:

“began during Luzzatto’s life, [and] has continued unabated into our day.”¹⁷⁹

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto soon began to get into trouble with the majority of Italian rabbis, who held influential positions of leadership, for his teaching of *Kabbalah*. They threatened him with ex-communication and accused him of heresy. They objected to the fact that he had written a work entitled ‘*Zohar Tinyana*’ (*Second Zohar*),¹⁸⁰ and to his claims of visitations by a *Magid*:

¹⁷⁷ According to Luzzatto, *Igrot Ramchal*, 2001a: nos. 39 and 53, he cut his beard at 14 and only re-grew it at age 24. (Some say he only trimmed his moustache not his beard). This point may seem irrelevant, but a beardless teacher of *Kabbalah* would be considered by many to be an anathema.

¹⁷⁸ We shall discuss the personal communications between R. Luzzatto and his teacher later in this section.

¹⁷⁹ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁸⁰ R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto had written numerous commentaries under “*magidic influence*,” including a thousand-page commentary to Ecclesiastes and a two-hundred-page book of *Tikunim*. These were all written “*in the style and language of the Zohar*” (Carlebach 1987:4, 17).

“In 1727 he declared that he had seen a maggid who revealed divine secrets to him daily... 1730 Luzzatto was obliged to sign a document which forbade him from either learning or teaching the Kabbalah.” (Danieli n.d.:100).

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto kept a diary of his visitations which survives only in fragments. He also claimed he was visited by the biblical Adam, Avraham, and Moshe as well as by the King Messiah. Concerning Moshe, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto:

“progressed from believing himself to be an epigone of Moses, to an actual transfiguration into Moses” (Carlebach 1987:4).

The *Sabbatian* expositor R. Moshe Chagiz (see section 3.1.4) made a poignant plea to the rabbis not to publish R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s writings. He feared that:

“[i]f his [Luzzatto’s]¹⁸¹ books would be printed, they would state how [Moses the] Faithful Shepherd, Messiah, and Elijah called him 'Rabbi! Rabbi!' A new Torah would emerge from him” (recorded in Ginsburg 1937, I:162-163 and II:360).¹⁸²

In 1729, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s foremost disciple, R. Yekutiel Gordon, penned a letter ‘introducing’ his teacher to the wider world and quoted him saying that Shabbatai Tzvi was a “*mistake*.” R. Yakov Emden immediately responds to the use of the word “*mistake*,” and writes:

באמרו על ענין ש"צ שהוא טעות, לא אמר שהוא שוא ודבר שקר... כמו שהיה
מהראוי...ומי יודע על מה נתכוין ביחוסו אליו הטעות, שמא חשב אותו למשיח בן
יוסף ולעצמו שמר המלוכה של מ"ד

“In saying that Shabbatai Tzvi was a ‘mistake,’ he [i.e., Luzzatto intentionally] omits to mention that he [i.e., Shabbatai Tzvi] was [indeed a] false [Messiah] and a lie...as one would have normally expected...Who knows if, by ascribing to him the [designation] ‘mistake,’ he considered him [i.e., Shabbatai Tzvi] to be Mashiach ben Yosef and reserved for himself [i.e., for Luzzatto] the dominion of

¹⁸¹ Square brackets are mine.

¹⁸² Translation by Carlebach (1987:21). This work by Ginsburg was later republished (with some additions) in 2001, by Mordecai Shriqui, entitled *Igrot Ramchal*.

Mashiach ben David” (R. Yakov Emden, *Torat haKenaot*, 1845:111).¹⁸³

Despite the accusations against him, it can be said that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto brought about a democratisation of mysticism. He writes:

“My associates are not people who engage in the Torah as a profession to become rabbis in Italy. They are simple people, but their souls are holy ...My approach is not that of the other rabbis of our cities, and I must lead this generation according to its needs...I leave the straw and the chaff [the exoteric Torah] for the beasts [the rabbis], and I ingest only that which is worthy of human consumption [the esoteric Torah]...Although many of our sages have not accepted this [that their primary pursuit should be the esoteric lore], I can only follow the truth” (Ginzburg, *Igrot*, 1937, II:240, 238).¹⁸⁴

Concerning his notion of bringing mysticism to the masses, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto may have built on Shabbatai Tzvi, whose teachings and style he was familiar with. This democratisation of mysticism was also something the Baal Shem Tov was soon to accomplish (see section 2.5.2).

Natascia Danieli has made a study of the correspondence to and from R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto¹⁸⁵ and she has demonstrated just:

“how widespread the Shabbatean doctrines were in Italy in the second half of the 17th century and in the first half of the 18th century” (Danieli n.d.:102).

The letters show how – paralleling the incident involving R. Shlomo Ayllon in Amsterdam (see section 3.1.4) – the case concerning R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto attracted a wide range of rabbinic supporters and detractors. The *Beit Din* in Venice became central in the arbitration and agreed with the charges brought forward by R. Moshe Chagiz in 1729/30 that:

¹⁸³ Translation is mine. On this view, both R. Yakov Emden (see section 3.1.9) and R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto were intent of assuming the messianic role for themselves, in place of Shabbatai Tzvi.

¹⁸⁴ Translation by Carlebach (1987:16).

¹⁸⁵ Luzzatto, *Igrot Ramchal*, 2001a.

“Luzzatto’s works, like those of Nehemiah Ḥiyya Ḥayon, were full of Shabbatean ideas and were dangerous for the Jewish community” (Danieli n.d.:109).

In a letter written by R. Moshe Chagiz, he referred to followers of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto as “*members of this evil sect*,” an allusion to the *Sabbatian* sect of Shabbatai Tzvi (Ginsburg, *Igrot*, 1937, I:20).

For the next few years, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto went very quiet until 1734 when he got permission to print his *Choker uMekubal*.¹⁸⁶ This sparked the second phase of the Luzzatto dispute but this time R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was defiant and refused to sign any restrictive documents. Instead, he went to Amsterdam in 1735 where he was supported by the *Sefaradi* community (paralleling the case of R. Shlomo Ayllon who was also supported by the *Sefaradi* community [see section 3.1.4])¹⁸⁷ – although he still did not teach *Kabbalah* in public. On his way to Amsterdam, he passed through Frankfurt where R. Yakov Cohen Poper determined that:

“a small portion [of Luzzatto’s writings] was to be burned, the rest buried, in a manner that they would soon mold and crumble away” (Carlebach 1987:22).¹⁸⁸

With the addition of a declaration that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and his group would not study *Kabbalah* until the age of forty, R. Yakov Cohen Poper ruled that the matter had come to a close:

“It is never to be mentioned again, neither in writing nor orally, so that the scholars will cease their quarrel with one another” (recorded in Ginsburg, 1937, *Igrot*, II:396).

¹⁸⁶ R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto received permission to print this work, from his teacher, R. Yeshayahu Bassan. However, as far as I can ascertain, the work was not printed in his lifetime and remained in manuscript form. The first edition came out in 1785 in Shklov. Online source: <https://www.kedem-auctions.com/en/content/choker-umekubal-ramchal-%E2%80%93-shklow-1785-%E2%80%93-first-edition>. Retrieved on 06 June 2023. Sclar (2014:179) maintains that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto did author the work but that R. Yeshayahu Bassan was reluctant to pen the Approbation. He wrote “*Now you repay my kindness with ingratitude by forcing me to affix my name to a work that will surely find disfavor!*” Finally, he reluctantly wrote that he saw nothing “*in it that seemed twisted and perverted*” (Sclar 2014:274).

¹⁸⁷ Another similarity is that the same R. Moshe Chagiz who opposed R. Shlomo Ayllon was also “*Luzzatto’s principal opponent*” (Danieli n.d.:103).

¹⁸⁸ Square brackets are mine.

The second phase of the Luzzatto dispute, however, did not garner as much opposition against R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto as the initial phase. R. Shimshon Morpurgo, for example, who initially was an accuser, now turned mediator. Danieli explains how she interprets the cooling down of the opposition to R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (something that was not paralleled in the continual vehemence of the opposition to R. Nechemia Chayon [see section 3.1.4]):

“The reason for this was that Luzzatto, like themselves, was not really a Shabbatean, but had been influenced first by the Lurianic Kabbalah which pervades all of the Shabbatean works, and then by the Shabbatean kabbalistic interpretation” (Danieli n.d.:110).¹⁸⁹

In a similar vein, Scholem deals with the question of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's alleged *Sabbatianism* as follows:

“Although even in [his] secret writings Luzzatto...repudiated the claims of Shabbetai Zevi...[he was] without doubt deeply influenced by some of the paradoxical teachings of Shabbatean Kabbalah...He even tried to find a place for Shabbetai Zevi, though not a messianic one, in his scheme of things” (Scholem 1972b:col.1251).¹⁹⁰

Danieli (n.d.:101) agrees with Scholem and reinforces his view that “*Luzzatto persisted in the denial of his own Shabbatean faith, whereas...he practised it frequently and in various ways.*” She explains that even in his *Kinat haShem Tzeva-ot*, which he wrote to repudiate the charges of *Sabbatianism* levelled against him, he did not deny that “*there was some truth in the Shabbatean kabbalistic ideas.*”

Thus, both Danieli and Scholem adopt a rather ambiguous approach toward R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's *Sabbatianism*. He imbibed *Sabbatian* ideology but, they maintain, he was *not* a *Sabbatian*. To support this approach, Danieli explains that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was not unique in this regard:

¹⁸⁹ Joseph Dan similarly contends that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was “*the dominant Jewish world view*” during the seventeenth century (Tishby 2008:xxi) but not all scholars agree with this. For a discussion on the extent of *Lurianic* influences on *Sabbatian Kabbalah* see Michal (2022a:14,112,116,119,120,131 and 135).

¹⁹⁰ Square brackets are mine.

“During the first half of the 18th century, all of the rabbis involved in kabbalistic studies had a clear understanding of the Shabbatean works” (Danieli n.d.:110).

Like Danieli and Scholem, David Sclar (2017:56-7) also adopts an ambiguous approach. In his study of what he calls the “*cultural environment of Italian Hasidism*” which deals with “*a multi-generational network of pietists [who]¹⁹¹ spanned northern Italy between the end of the 17th and the middle of the 18th centuries,*” he discusses numerous important rabbis, all of whom had some ties to *Sabbatianism*. He asks:

“What are we to make of the relationship between Sabbateanism and Italian Hasidism (or pietism in general), considering that Zacut, Vitale, Bassan, Luzzatto and others were at various points associated with the heretical movement or its adherents?” (Sclar 2017:63).

Yet in his magnificent 26-page publication which deals almost exclusively with rabbis tainted by a ‘brush’ with *Sabbatianism*, Sclar uses the term “*Sabbateanism*” only once (as it appears in the aforementioned quotation). Instead, he uses more neutral terms such as “*Italian Hasidim*,” “*multi-generational pietists*” and “*kabbalist-rabbis*.” And Sclar (2017:57-8) clearly acknowledges – as one example – that R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale, who “*lay at the core of this geographically dispersed assembly,*” was “*so respected for his religious devotion that contemporary heresy-hunters tolerated his latent belief in the messianic validity of Sabbatai Tsevi.*” This same R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale was R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s teacher. He displayed a portrait of Shabbatai Tzvi in his home and openly published a *Kabbalistic* work on the Book of Lamentations according to the tradition of R. Natan of Gaza. Yet, he was so highly regarded that Sclar tells us that the Italian rabbis called him the “*High Priest*” (*Cohen Gadol* = R. Binyamin haCohen). Ashkenazi rabbis who had never even met him, referred to him as being “*mushlam ba-hasidut,*” or *perfect in piety* (Sclar 2017:58). Sclar (2017:60) again omitting the word “*Sabbatian*” writes about how “*Padua’s young kabbalists emerged from these trends in Italian Hasidism*” (emphasis on the neutral and impartial expression “*Italian Hasidism*” is mine).

¹⁹¹ Square brackets are mine.

Thus, we see that Scholem, Danieli and Sclar do not refer to R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, including some of his teachers and students, as actual ‘*Sabbatians*,’ although they acknowledge their *Sabbatian* contacts.

Joseph Dan and Isaiah Tishby, however, are far more forthright in their appraisal of the *Sabbatian* component of these Italian rabbis. Dan explains that the reason why some of the rabbis adopted a *Sabbatian* form of *ideology* but rejected the messianism of Shabbatai Tzvi, was often because they believed that they were messianic figures themselves! This was the case regarding both R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and his student R. Moshe David Valle. Dan writes:¹⁹²

“If Shabateanism is defined as a belief in the messianic mission of the person Shabetai Tsevi, Valle was not a Shabatean, because he believed that it was he himself who bore the messianic burden...However, if Shabateanism is defined as a messianic theology...then Valle, and Luzzatto with him, should be regarded as belonging to that spiritual camp” (Tishby 2008:xxi).

This way an argument can indeed be made to consider R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto to have been a *Sabbatian*. Dan further points out that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto did not regard Shabbatai Tzvi as a “*false messianic pretender, as a sinner, heretic, and apostate*,” instead, he saw Shabbatai Tzvi as fulfilling a pivotal “*traditional role in the messianic process*” (Tishby 2008:xx).¹⁹³

Tishby (1957b:336) shows that while R. Yakov Emden and R. Moshe Chagiz did level charges of *Sabbatianism* against R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (as indicated earlier in this section), their opposition lacked definitive proof and was essentially weak. However, by consulting the personal communications between R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and his teacher R. Yeshayahu Bassan the *Sabbatian* connection becomes more apparent.

“The fondness and devotion of the teacher [i.e., R. Bassan] towards his student [i.e., R. Luzzatto] covered over the *Sabbatian* suspicions

¹⁹² In the Introduction to Isaiah Tishby's *Messianic Mysticism* (2008).

¹⁹³ This despite the fact that the *Sabbatians* under R. Natan of Gaza had completely re-theologised the nature of the Messiah from a traditionally ‘passive’ to an ‘active’ Messiah (see Joseph Dan's explanation in section 2.2.5). Dan also shows how R. Moshe David Valle's messianic writings reflect this new *Sabbatian* definition of a ‘supernal’ Messiah – an indication of his *Sabbatian* leanings (Tishby 2008:xxi).

which are revealed numerous times in these intimate letters...[Sabbatianism] is revealed here more than in his other public expressions; and he even hides secrets from his teacher ” (Tishby 1957b:336).¹⁹⁴

In these private letters, the claim of visitations by the *Magid* and a focus on messianism raised great concern for R. Yeshayahu Bassan who rebukes his student:

אבל קשה בעיני, שיבואו דבריד בהתמדה על ענין משיח, כי זה א' מן הדברים
המכניסים ספק שמא יש בדבר תערובת ס"א: שזה א' מן הסימנים המובהקים להיות
המגיד בעלטה ח"ו, שזו דרכן של סטרין אחרין לערבב המוחות בדברי משיח להכשיל
את ישראל

“But it disturbs me that your words persistently come back to the question of the Messiah because that is one of the issues that instil doubt [into your writings], suggesting that they may contain an element of Sitra Achra [evil or the ‘other side’]: For this is one of the significant indications that the Magid may have brought you to darkness, heaven forefend; as this is the way of all evil, to confuse the mind with messianic matters and cause Israel to stray” (recorded in Ginsburg, *Igrot*, 1937, I:86).

R. Yeshayahu Bassan did not mention the term ‘*Sabbatian*’ explicitly in this letter, but from the context of the confusing times, it would surely indicate an allusion thereto, especially considering that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto had a “*complicated*” relationship with *Sabbatianism* (Tishby 1957b:337). It is also clear from the letters that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was:

“occupied with the activity and creative ideas of R. Natan of Gaza, and his secrets were revealed to him from the mouth of his ‘Magid.’ But because of the nature of this secret, he had to withhold it from appearing in writing, lest it fall into the hands of his accusers and intensify the opposition against him. Contained within that secret was the explanation of the activity of the Sabbatian prophet [i.e., R. Natan

¹⁹⁴ Translation is mine.

of Gaza] according to the wondrous plan of God” (Tishby 1957b:337).¹⁹⁵

Astoundingly, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto then proceeds to inform his teacher that he would like to write more:

רק ענין ר' נתן לא אוכל להשיב לכ"ת בכתב, ופה אל פה, אם יזכני ה', אגלה לו
נאמנה; כי צריך אני לזהר בענין זה

“Only, I can't reveal anything about R. Natan [of Gaza] to your honour, in writing. But, if God grants it, then I shall faithfully reveal more [to you], orally; for I must be cautious in this matter” (recorded in Ginsburg, *Igrot*, 1937, I:114).¹⁹⁶

Significantly, in the *private* correspondence with his teacher, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto does not shun his mystical association with R. Natan of Gaza. However, in his *public* statement to the Venetian rabbis, he claimed: “*The matter of Natan of Gaza is falsehood and an absolute blunder*” (recorded in Ginsburg, *Igrot*, 1937, I:76).

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto maintained literary material from R. Natan of Gaza in his possession. When questioned about why he had not destroyed such *Sabbatian* literature, he responded that *Sabbatian* works need not be eliminated but only stored in a *Geniza*. This was to hide the evil in them from ignorant readers. However, they were still to be actively preserved for study by sages who understood that they contained kernels of truth (Tishby 1957b:337).

Of interest to this study, focusing on *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements is Dan's observation that during the nineteenth century, the *Mitnagdic* (opponents to *Chassidism* after the great divide of 1772)¹⁹⁷ took ‘ownership’ of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. This was because from around the middle of the nineteenth century, the *Mussar* (*Ethics*) branch of the *Mitnagdic* movement was established, emphasising the *ethical* works of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. These writings emerged “[f]rom the sober pietistic works which he wrote in his latter years” (Carlebach 1987:2). These included works like *Mesilat Yesharim*, *Derech haShem* and *Daat Tevunot* which he wrote in Amsterdam. According to Dan, it was precisely

¹⁹⁵ Translation is mine.

¹⁹⁶ Translation is mine.

¹⁹⁷ This is a reference to the bans of ex-communication issued by the *Mitnagdim* against the *Chassidim* between 1772 and 1815.

because R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was banned from producing *Kabbalistic* works that he “hid” his mystical ideology within “*philosophical discourse*.” Dan remarks rather cynically:

“It seems that these ultra-Orthodox opponents of any change in Jewish tradition embraced Luzzatto despite the accusations that he was a secret adherent of Shabetai Tsevi” (Tishby 2008:xxiii).

Also, around the nineteenth century, some *Chassidic* courts showed interest in R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s writings. Dan, who worked with Tishby, points out that one of Tishby’s main areas of interest was “*Luzzatto as a source of hasidic thought*”. For example:

“[Tishby] proved that the hasidic slogan ‘God, the Torah, and Israel are one and the same’ which is often quoted as a Zoharic dictum, was actually formulated by Luzzatto and his circle” (Tishby 2008:xxiv).

Moshe Idel observes that while both *Lurianic Kabbalah* and *Sabbatian Kabbalah* did not emphasise the personal and experiential notion of *Deveikut* (*clinging to God or unio mystica*)¹⁹⁸ (see section 2.4.3), R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s writings did – and this may have been the Luzzatto link to *Chassidism* with its attention to *Deveikut* (Idel 1998:207).

Tishby suggests another possible line of influence between R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and the *Chassidic* movement, and that is through his student, R. Moshe David Valle. The latter used, if not coined, the mystical expression of “*haTzadik haMevarer*” (*the Righteous man who Separates [the good from the evil]*) with reference to the *Sabbatian* conceptualisation of an ‘active’ Messiah who alone is capable of waging war against the forces of evil – as opposed to the traditional ‘passive’ Messiah of *Lurianic Kabbalah* (see section 2.2.5) (Tishby 2008:xx).

In a sense, the *Chassidic* leader, or *Rebbe*, also came to represent such an individual (for more on R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s possible contribution to *Chassidism* see section 2.5.11.4). This influence is not just the passing down of nomenclature but of the very concept of:

¹⁹⁸ Goldish (2018b:513), however, does mention how common it was for ordinary people to participate in ‘prophecy’ during the *Sabbatian* period – but I think there is a difference between popular *Sabbatian* prophecy, which Goldish (2004:129) describes as taking on a form of mimesis or mimicry, and personal *Deveikut* as *unio mystica*.

“the tsadik as a divine emissary who represents his community in the struggle against evil...as well as contributing to the salvation of the whole people” (Tishby 2008:xxiv).

Regarding this fundamental *Sabbatian* innovation of a new model of an ‘active’ Messiah who is not just the *consequence* of the messianic age but its very *cause* in that he alone can subdue the evil forces which are withholding redemption, Tishby writes:

“Take the idea that the Messiah’s soul, before it comes into the world, underdoes torments in the realm of the Sitra Ahra [the ‘other’ or ‘evil side’], where it struggles to subdue the husks and carry out *tikunim* in preparation for the Redemption. This idea itself is not Lurianic: it has its source in the innovations of Nathan of Gaza and his disciples” (Tishby 2008:231).¹⁹⁹

Tishby explains, that because of the blatant *Sabbatian* undertones to this new model of an ‘active’ Messiah, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (in his *Kinat haShem Tzeva-ot* and *Maamar haGeula*) intentionally changes some technical detail in terms of the *timing* of the descent of the Messiah into evil. In R. Natan of Gaza’s model, the Messiah’s descent into evil began during *creation* (during the *Tzimtzum* [contraction] or *Shevirat haKelim* [shattering of the vessels] phases). But in R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s model, the descent only took place from the time of the *destruction* of the Temple.

In Tishby’s analysis, this change in timing is not just an incidental or technical detail. It’s a red herring and “*Luzzatto was here camouflaging his true view*” to lead his readers off the *Sabbatian* trail (Tishby 2008:231). Evidently, R. Natan of Gaza’s depiction of the Messiah battling the forces of evil since the time of *creation* was a well-known *Sabbatian* construct and, therefore, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto had to introduce a different time framework while keeping the basic *Sabbatian* concept of the Messiah battling evil, unchanged. Tishby based his conclusion on readings from another of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s works, *Adir baMarom*, where he had “*slipped a piece of Shabatean theology in code language*” (Tishby 2008:232).

¹⁹⁹ Square brackets are mine.

I did find a reference in *Adir baMarom*, apparently speaking about the Messiah being active during the *creation* process (and not descending into the ‘emptiness’ only after the *destruction* of the Temple):

אך שרש ויה [י] אור, הוא ורוח אלקים מרחפת וכו'...שאפילו בשעה שהיה התהו ובהו, לא זז רוחו של משיח זה מהיות מרחפת על פני המים. ולכן יכול אחר כך להתחזק וליעשות האור

“The root of ‘Let there be light’ (Genesis 1:3) is [the preceding verse] ‘and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters’ (Genesis 1:2). So that even at the time [of creation!] when there was ‘emptiness and void’ (Genesis 1:2), the spirit of the Messiah did not cease from hovering over the face of the waters. This, therefore, allowed for [the next phase which was] the creation of light” (R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Adir baMarom*, 1995:389).²⁰⁰

This text states that “*the spirit of the Messiah did not cease from hovering over the face of the waters*” which implies that the Messiah prefigured and even pre-empted the creation of light. This source from *Adir baMarom* indicates that the Messiah was active and bringing light to the darkness (evil) during the *creation* process and not, as R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto had written in his *Kinat haShem Tzeva-ot* and *Maamar haGeula*, that the Messiah only descended into the evil after the *destruction* of the Temple. It seems that in the latter works, he may indeed have been disguising his view so evident in *Adir baMarom*.

It is also possible that in *Adir baMarom*, the inherent equating of the “*spirit of the Messiah*” to the “*spirit of God*” (both of which hovered over the waters) may be related to the *Sabbatian* concept of the supernal power of the ‘active’ Messiah who acts as an intermediary between God and humans, defeating the husks of evil which ordinary mortals are unable to do.

This may relate directly to another source I noticed in *Adir baMarom* that similarly speaks to the supernal power of the ‘active’ *Sabbatian* Messiah, over the traditional ‘passive’ Messiah who had to wait for mortals to ‘raise the fallen sparks:’

ורוחו של משיח הוא בחינה עומדת לטהר כל העולמות כלם מכל חשך שבהם, כי הלא זה צריך ליעשות על ידי בני האדם

²⁰⁰ Translation is mine.

“And the spirit of the Messiah is of a level that can cleanse all the worlds in their entirety from the darkness within them, which surely was supposed to have been accomplished by [ordinary] sons of man”
(R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Adir baMarom*, 1995:389).²⁰¹

I suggest that this may be a reference to the *Sabbatian* notion of the shift in the role and function of the Messiah in accordance with R. Natan of Gaza’s innovation of an ‘active’ Messiah doing what was traditionally the duty of ordinary mortals who were unable to succeed at their task. Tishby, although not referring to these particular sources which I have indicated, writes:

“What [Luzzatto] really believed flashes out at us from the pages of *Adir bamarom*” (Tishby 2008:231).²⁰²

Tishby continues and suggests that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s teachings may also have reached Eastern Europe via his student, R. Yekutiel Gordon of Vilna who:

“preached his teacher’s ideas to the intellectuals from among whom the early Hasidic teachers emerged.”

Sclar (2010:142) shows how the historical *persona* of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was later successfully separated from an emerging ahistorical *persona*, turning him into one of the most revered rabbis of all time. This was primarily due to the feverish pace at which his writings were later published. Between 1857 and 1869, for example, about ten printers published more than twenty editions of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s works in six different cities. This created an irony that ignored the facts that R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto was the subject of a major heresy hunt, had his books confiscated, even burned and was condemned by some of his generation’s most respected rabbis:

“[N]o implicitly historical, time-bound element is evident in any of the writings. A first-time reader who had never heard of Luzzatto would have no knowledge of Luzzatto’s life and times, and certainly would have no reason to assume that there was anything unusual about the author. The printing of these books had given official sanction to Luzzatto’s work, and...the...Luzzatto controversy had simply ceased

²⁰¹ Translation is mine.

²⁰² Square brackets are mine.

to exist in the collective consciousness of European Jewry” (Sclar 2010:145).

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, thus, became the ‘father’ of Lithuanian *Mitnagdism* and *Mussar*, a type of ‘proto-*Chassid*,’ and even a ‘pioneer’ of modern Hebrew as the secular *Haskalah* (*Enlightenment*) Movement like to portray him. Different aspects of his *persona* had selectively been appropriated merely from “*his diverse intellectual contributions that survived in print*” (Sclar 2010:142), and the historical man plagued by allegations of *Sabbatianism* had disappeared.

3.11.1 Synthesis

While Tishby and Dan are convinced of the *Sabbatian* leanings of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, we have seen that other scholars, like Scholem, Danieli and Sclar, adopted a more ambiguous approach. But even if we disregard the views of Tishby and Dan, we are still left with the ambiguity surrounding the character of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. He doesn’t emerge free from some taint of *Sabbatianism*. This points to the pervasiveness of *Sabbatian* ideology that saturated the rabbinic world within which the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements were gestating. Scholem, Danieli and Sclar grapple with the question of how to define a rabbi who could study the *Sabbatian* doctrines, teach, disseminate, write and publish its ideology – and yet not be regarded as a *Sabbatian*. Historically, I cannot think of any other movement in religious Judaism where such dichotomy has ever been so endured and tolerated, especially concerning a matter the rabbinate itself had officially declared as a heresy. It is as if the usually binary rabbinate had suddenly created an exceptional eighteenth-century category of a non-*Sabbatian Sabbatian*. It is this ambivalent allure of *Sabbatian* teachings that we shall discuss next.

3.12 R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen and mainstream rabbinic forays into the matrix of *Sabbatian Kabbalah*

Influential and mainstream rabbis from the same period as the Baal Shem Tov would delve in and out of known *Sabbatian* writings with surprising ease. The writings of R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen (1691-1765) serve as an example of this surprising yet common phenomenon. He was a descendant of R. Meir, the *Maharam* of Padua

(1482-1564) and served in many communities throughout Europe. Eventually, he settled in Boskowitz in Moravia and was known as the Rav of Boskowitz. He was a typical mainstream rabbi – not a *Sabbatian* (Kahana 2012:611) – yet he openly studied *Sabbatian Kabbalah*. Fortunately, we know much about him because he fastidiously kept about two thousand pages of notebooks and diaries – some of which are held at the Bodleian Library at Oxford – on all matters *Halachic*, *Talmudic*, as well as personal encounters with mystics. One of these notebooks, *Yesh Manchilin* (Katzenellenbogen 1986) only published in 1986, offers “a unique glimpse into the world of an eighteenth-century Ashkenazi rabbi” (Kahana 2012:600).

Having demonstrated the unmistakable *Sabbatian* nature of R. Avraham Rovigo and his circle (see section 3.1.5) it is astounding for an esteemed mainstream rabbi like R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen to write about how he had met:

“[a] holy and pure man...[whose]²⁰³ faith was in the hidden secrets of Torah, and all the pious (Hasidim) including their most learned and ascetic, would approach him in order to draw living waters from his well of kabbalistic wisdom...My father...also attended him...his name was the Sage, our Master, Avraham Rovigo, may his memory be blessed, and let his merit be in our stead forever (R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen, *Yesh Manchilin*, 1986:section 6).²⁰⁴

A little later, in this same section of *Yesh Manchilin*, R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen makes a respectful reference to the *Sabbatian* work *Eshel Avraham*, produced by both R. Avraham Rovigo and his student R. Mordechai Ashkenazi. He lavishly praises the latter as being meritorious enough to have been taught by *Magid* (see section 3.1.3).

This raises the obvious question of whether or not R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen was aware of these *Sabbatian* associations. Kahana (2012:614), supporting my contention of *Sabbatian* saturation of the eighteenth-century rabbinic world, is convinced that R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen was unquestionably aware of these *Sabbatian* connections. Kahana proves this by showing how R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen had a manuscript of the *Shulchan Aruch* of the *Ari* (R. Yitzchak Luria) in his library. That of itself is not astonishing. However, found within this

²⁰³ Square brackets are mine.

²⁰⁴ Translation by Kahana (2012:601).

manuscript, which is also housed in the Bodleian Library, is another work of about fifteen pages, stating:

“penitential rectifications (tikune teshuva) sent from Gaza, instituted by our most dignified teacher, Rabbi Nathan the Prophet...”²⁰⁵

R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen was obviously aware of his possession and the nature of this composition because, on June 18, 1756, he wrote in this short manuscript (*Tikunei Teshuva* by R. Natan of Gaza) that it had been copied by R. Avraham Rovigo.

Kahana (2012:603) emphasises how R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen – who, again, he maintains, was not a *Sabbatian* – was nonetheless absorbed into the *Sabbatian* world of *Kabbalah* and clearly influenced by R. Avraham Rovigo. R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen claimed that R. Avraham Rovigo appeared to him in a dream, transmitting the biblical verse that corresponded to his (Katzenellenbogen’s) Hebrew name. More than fifty years later, R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen added to the same inscription in the R. Natan of Gaza manuscript, that he continued to recite that special verse.²⁰⁶

This assumption that R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen was not a *Sabbatian*, is based on his own words which he wrote in 1758:

“Now I have observed in this book that he [R. Avraham Rovigo]²⁰⁷ calls Nathan of Gaza a true and righteous prophet . . . the same man who prophesied falsely regarding Sabbatai Zevi...Lest anyone suspect me, God forbid, of being one of them, far be it for [me]...for in those days, in the year 1666, most communities of Israel believed in those strange matters. But their disgrace has since been revealed, and no more need be said” (inscription in *Shulchan Aruch haAri*)²⁰⁸

Kahana (2012:605) suggests that R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen’s additional and ‘apologetic’ inscription of 1758 may have been prompted by the debate between the

²⁰⁵ ‘Shulchan Aruch of the Ari and Other Kabbalistic Writings’ (Hebrew), Oxford manuscript, MS Mich. 36), 214a. Translated by Kahana (2012:603).

²⁰⁶ See also Pinchas Katzenellenbogen, *Yesh Manchilin, Machon Chatam Sofer*, Jerusalem 1986, section 6. For another reference to the apparent *Sabbatian* practice of reciting a biblical verse that corresponds to one’s Hebrew name, see sections 4.3 and 4.6. It is of interest that later *Chassidim* also adopted the practice of reciting verses corresponding to names.

²⁰⁷ Square brackets are mine.

²⁰⁸ ‘Shulchan Aruch of the Ari and Other Kabbalistic Writings’ (Hebrew), Oxford manuscript, MS Mich. 36, 259a. Translated by Kahana (2012:604).

Sabbatians and the rabbis in Kamenets-Podolsk which resulted in the burning of the Talmud in 1757. This may have helped him to explain why he had a *Sabbatian* manuscript in his home. Also, he was able to argue that there was a fundamental difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’. ‘Then,’ in 1666, *Sabbatianism* had been the norm, involving “*most communities of Israel*.” It may even have been a “*necessary faith*” (Kahana 2012:605) but ‘now,’ in hindsight (or perhaps out of fear of repercussions) it is clear how antinomian the *Sabbatian* movement was. Nevertheless, because the protagonists like R. Natan of Gaza (d. 1680) and R. Avraham Rovigo (d. 1714) had lived ‘then,’ even though they were mistaken, their words have meaning and their holiness is to be emulated.

“Katzenellenbogen...had indeed fallen prey to the allure of forbidden knowledge...he had to confront afresh the implications of a ‘normative’ rabbi such as himself possessing a Sabbatean manuscript” (Kahana 2012:606).

To say the least, R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen had a complicated relationship with *Sabbatianism* although he claimed he wasn’t a believer in Shabbatai Tzvi. Writing in 1761 when he completed his *Yesh Manchilin*, he denounced Shabbatai Tzvi:

“And what shall we do with those who believe in Sabbatai Zevi...and claim that he [the Messiah]²⁰⁹ has already arrived; may their name be blotted out? For if so, where is the Temple in its glory?” (Katzenellenbogen, *Yesh Manchilin*, 1986: section 241).²¹⁰

Yet, he never removed or tried to hide his earlier references and praise of his *Sabbatian* rabbinic heroes. This, to my mind, is an indication that he was speaking the truth when he wrote he was not a *Sabbatian*, otherwise, he would probably have expunged his previous references to the likes of R. Avraham Rovigo and R. Mordechai Ashkenazi, and hid the *Tikunei Teshuva* manuscript of R. Natan of Gaza. In his view, the *Sabbatian* rabbis may have been mistaken, but worthy of emulation. This does not mean that he was comfortable vacillating between two worlds.

²⁰⁹ Square brackets are mine.

²¹⁰ One of the rabbinic ‘proofs’ that the Messiah is real is the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen expressed his theological torment in his own words when he discovered a *Sabbatian* work (evident already from the fourth page of the book) entitled *Or Yisrael*²¹¹ by R. Yisrael Yofeh (Jaffe) (see section 6.5).²¹² It aroused suspicion because of its repeated use of the word “*Tzvi*,” which its author claimed was inserted by someone else with dubious intentions. This, despite the fact that his son, R. Aharon Jaffe, had edited the work.²¹³ R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen grappled with this dilemma over *Or Yisrael* for four decades and describes how right up until he turned 71 he had been through periods when he had read and then desisted from reading *Or Yisrael*:

“I realized that this man [R. Yisrael Yofeh]²¹⁴ was indeed a great Kabbalist. I learned wonderful ideas from this book, which I studied literally every day. However, when I came to realize from his words that he was a believer in the faith of Sabbatai Zevi...I was confused as to what to do; I would not read it on a regular basis as before, but only occasionally...” (R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen, *Derashot veChidushei Torah*).²¹⁵

Finally, at over seventy years of age, he again turned frequently to *Or Yisrael*. Adding to the confusion, R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen continued to use the *Tikunei Teshuva* manuscript of R. Natan of Gaza during those same decades of his tormented uncertainty with *Or Yisrael*. Yet, notwithstanding his preoccupation with *Sabbatian* literature, Kahana (2012:611) is adamant that “*Katzenellenbogen was not a Sabbatean*.” This is why an analysis of R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen becomes important as a test case, because it draws our attention to the confusion, ambiguity and angst many rabbis like him would have experienced during much of the eighteenth century.

²¹¹ Jaffe, *Or Yisrael*, 1702.

²¹² R. Yisrael ben Aharon Yofeh (c.1640-after 1703) must not be confused with R. Yisrael Yofeh, (the student of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi) who was the printer of (and partial contributor to) *Shivchei haBest* printed in 1814 (see section 4.7.4).

²¹³ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jaffe-israel-ben-aaron>. Retrieved on 30 January 2023.

²¹⁴ Square brackets are mine.

²¹⁵ Oxford manuscript, MS Heb. E. 130, 24a–b. Translated by Kahana (2012:608-10).

3.13 *Haskamot*: Approbations attesting to the authority of *Sabbatian* literature

Haskamot are official endorsements or approbations to religious books. They are issued by accredited rabbinic sources and, to this day, often determine who will or will not read a particular book. It is usually the first section of the book to be consulted by a prudent buyer and reader, to ascertain the trustworthiness of the contents and the writer. The previous section (3.1.11) touched on two *Sabbatian* works, *Eshel Avraham* by R. Avraham Rovigo and his student R. Mordechai Ashkenazi, and *Ohel Yisrael* by R. Yisrael Yofeh. It must be noted that these books, as well as many other *Sabbatian* works, all adopt the traditional format of the archetypal rabbinic *sefer* (*religious book*) making them indistinguishable from all the other mainstream religious works. From the *Shaar Blat* (*frontispiece*) to the font, layout and writing style, these works appear to be typical technical *Kabbalistic* and ethical rabbinic works that would enhance any rabbinic library. *Ohel Yisrael* boasts six *Haskamot* and *Eshel Avraham* has an impressive list of at least ten *Haskamot*, all from rabbinic community leaders and Judges in *Batei Din* (*Jewish ecclesiastical courts*) in Lithuania, Russia and Germany. A reader of these books would be under the impression that they were authoritative works from the mainstream rabbinic canon with each word passing the 'quality control' of rabbinic oversight. To this day many of these works are still to be found in rabbinic collections, libraries and databases without any indication of their *Sabbatian* nature. The copy of *Eshel Avraham* in HebrewBooks.org, for example, was sourced from the Chabad-Lubavitch Library and is presented under the generic category, '*Kabbalah*.'

3.14 Synthesis

In chapter three, we examined the structures of a society saturated with secret *Sabbatian* personalities. These included the extensive *Sabbatian* circle of R. Avraham Rovigo; R. Yissachar Baer Perlhefter (Eibeschuetz) and his association with R. Meir Eisenstadt and his brother, R. Mordechai Eisenstadt; R. Chaim Malach and R. Yehuda Chasid, and the *Sabbatian Aliya*; the conflict between R. Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi and R. Moshe Chagiz against R. Shlomo Ayylon and R. Nechemia Chayon in Amsterdam; R. Yehuda Leib Prossnitz with his messianic claim, his apparent writings, and his association with R. Meir Eisenstadt; the great rabbinic controversy between R. Yakov Emden and R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz; the debate surrounding the *Sabbatian*

leanings of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and his teachers R. Yeshayahu Bassan and R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale; the parallels with the Amsterdam debacle, and an analysis of some of his writings; and we saw how a mainstream rabbi like R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen, an apparent non-*Sabbatian*, was drawn into the allure of *Sabbatian* literature and his angst of living in two different rabbinic worlds. We also noted how many *Sabbatian* mystical works were able to receive approbations from community leaders and heads of rabbinic courts. In keeping with these texts and works that seemed to exude an ambiguity, vacillating somewhere between *Sabbatianism* and mainstream *Kabbalistic* literature, we now turn from the investigation of *personalities* to chapter four which looks at the proliferation of mystical *literature* as possible conduits for *Sabbatian* ideology, in the period just before the rise of *Chassidism* as the seventeenth century began to merge with the eighteenth century.

One point that stands out from the period we have just covered is how porous and undefined the theological boundaries were, at a time when one might have expected a unanimous and unambiguous opposition to an officially declared heretical movement that had just produced an apostatised Messiah. This was not a stable environment upon which to base another emerging movement. The nascent *Chassidic* movement, with its emphasis on aspects of mysticism and messianism,²¹⁶ chose as it were, one of the most theologically challenging periods of Jewish history in which to present its new approaches.

²¹⁶ See section 2.5.3, though, where some, like Scholem, tend to downplay the role of messianism in early *Chassidism*.

CHAPTER 4

PROLIFERATION OF MYSTICAL AND ETHICAL LITERATURE AS POSSIBLE CONDUITS FOR SABBATIAN IDEOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we examine some of the popular texts – many of which have subsequently become quite ubiquitous and authoritative – that pervaded the literature just before and around the time the *Chassidic* movement was developing. These texts were often of a mystical and ethical nature and were produced in both Hebrew and the vernacular Yiddish. The use of the vernacular is significant as it was an obvious and effective means of communicating mystical ideas to the populace. By understanding the provenance and content of these writings, we may get some indication of the direction in which this *Kabbalistic* literature was moving at that time. It is, therefore, important for this study to establish to what extent if at all, these texts were related to *Sabbatian* Ideology.

4.2 Mystical and ethical Yiddish texts

Jean Baumgarten (2007:73) notes how mystical teachings became popular and widespread during the seventeenth century and continued to exert their influence well into the eighteenth century. In addition to their theoretical theosophy, many of these mystical works encouraged experiential theurgical practices such as exorcisms, expounded on demonology, and promoted the use of amulets for protection. The language often used to discuss these phenomena was Yiddish. Primary mystical texts had previously been predominantly in Hebrew and Aramaic but they were now being translated into Yiddish to be more accessible to the people. After the false messiahs of Shabbatai Tzvi and Frank (and others), and after the antinomianism that often followed in their wake, there was a need for a remedial theology of “*moral redemption*” and “*individual purification*” (Baumgarten 2007:78). Hence the emphasis on *ethical* writings, although even these were still framed within the domain and idiom of *mysticism*. This led to the emergence of:

“many mystical and ethical treatises that attempted to create a synthesis of kabbalistic themes, mystical techniques and theurgical practices” (Baumgarten 2007:73).

Notably, this concentration on mystical and ethical works was perpetuated by “*moderate Sabbatians*” who produced and distributed this literature from around “*the end of the 17th century to the first decades of the 18th century*” which corresponds to the focus period of this study. It was during this phase that the more centrist *Sabbatians* felt that “*the failure of the false Messiah gave rise to a need for moral redemption*” (Baumgarten 2007:78). This remedial and self-reflecting theology perhaps intimated a convenient shift from the blameworthy rabbinic *leadership* to the unworthy *generation*. The blameworthiness for the false messianism now lay with the people and not their leaders. This way, a new style of literature was birthed which, as I shall show, had many points of intersection with the parallel developing literature of *Chassidism*.

Some of these popular texts, however, included rather technical material as well. The *Zohar*, as an example of this proliferation of mystical texts, had only been published twice during the seventeenth century,²¹⁷ but during the eighteenth century, it was edited fifteen times and included around twenty commentaries and anthologies. Baumgarten (2007:74) points out that during this period, the study of *Kabbalah* had become so popular that it was “*a major ingredient of the religious culture*”. Some of these *Zoharic* texts, as well as other mystical writings on *Lurianic Kabbalah*, also began to appear in Yiddish.

The intense mystical component of this new mystico-ethical style of literature must not be underestimated. The conceptualisation of profoundly negative, cunning and conniving spiritual activity and the powerful influence of demonic and evil forces, such as Lilith, Ashmedai and Samael play a large role in these texts. The notions of *Gilgul* (*transmigration of the soul*) and life after death are emphasised as well as various magical and theurgical practices (Baumgarten 2007:79). One notices that, often, echoes of previous *Lurianic Kabbalah* had also been subtly adopted and reworked into this new version of a post-Shabbatai Tzvi *Sabbatian Kabbalah*:

²¹⁷ In Lublin during 1623 and in Sulzbach during 1683.

“Man is placed at the center of a cosmic drama... There is a direct link between performing a mitsva [a rabbinic or biblical commandment] or giving in to sin on earth and the echoes in the upper world... sin could wreak on the sinner, on the community and on the upper spheres. The obsession of the yetser ha-ra [evil inclination] and the power of the Sitra ahra [evil side] lead, in accordance with Shabbatean thought, to emphasize the healing role of asceticism and repentance” (Baumgarten 2007:79).²¹⁸

Because of the proliferation of Yiddish books, many were published without *Haskamot* (*Approbations*) (see section 3.1.12) because practically, it was “*impossible for the rabbis to control every book*” (Baumgarten 2009:4). Many of these ideas and themes were soon to be directly reflected in *Chassidic* literature as well.

“It should be noted that most of the mystical texts in Yiddish...were published in the period just preceding the rise of Hasidism...[M]any themes seem to prepare the reception and dissemination of Hasidic ideas among Jewish people. We can consider Kav ha-yashar [see section 4.4] as a kind of pre or proto-Hasidic text in Yiddish...When such books...were published, the cultural ground or background was prepared to receive such Hasidic treatises” (Baumgarten 2007:91).²¹⁹

Of interest to this study is the fact that the *Chassidic* movement spread predominantly in areas where Yiddish was spoken. This is why *Chassidism* never spread significantly to Western Europe or Central Europe where German was spoken. It never spread to Italy either where the Jews had stopped speaking Yiddish already during the seventeenth century. In Hungary, *Chassidism* only spread to the northeastern regions where Yiddish was spoken. It did not impact the Balkans either, where Ladina and Ottoman Turkish were spoken.

“[Chassidism] never took hold in regions where Yiddish was no longer the vernacular [or in places where] Yiddish was derided as a backward and corrupt ‘jargon’... The geographical boundaries of the

²¹⁸ Square brackets are mine.

²¹⁹ Square brackets are mine.

spread of Hasidism were the same as those of the Yiddish language”
(Mayse and Reiser 2018:130).

Also noteworthy is the indication that *Sabbatian* Yiddish texts joined the important *genre* of general Yiddish literature with their sometimes subtle and other times overt *Sabbatian* references and allusions.

As I shall argue, these texts would have served to channel some of their *Sabbatian* ideology to the developing thought of the nascent *Chassidic* movement. We now turn to some examples of the prevailing and popular culture of Yiddish literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

4.3 R. Yechiel Michal Epstein and his *Derech haYashar leOlam haBa* and *Kitzur Shelah* (1683)

In 1697, a prayer book entitled *Seder Tefila Derech Yeshara* (*Order of Prayers: The Correct Path*) was produced by R. Yechiel Michal Epstein (d. 1706)²²⁰ who was a suspected *Sabbatian* (Baumgarten 2007:75). According to Carlebach (1992:259), “*Epstein was a Sabbatian.*” Gershom Scholem (2007:355) also considers R. Yechiel Michal Epstein to have been a *Sabbatian* while Yehoshua Horowitz (2007:474) is somewhat ambiguous:

“It is very doubtful whether he had any associations with the Shabbatean movement, although he was suspected of it because of the wording of a certain passage in his siddur.”

R. Yechiel Michal Epstein joins the ranks of many other rabbinic authors from that era who were also suspected of being secret *Sabbatians*. R. Yosef ben Moshe Ashkenazi of Przemyślany, as another example, similarly produced a prayer book and, according to the frontispiece of his *Keter Yosef* published in 1700,²²¹ he was a prestigious descendant of the biblical commentator, Rashi.²²² Nevertheless, he too was

²²⁰ R. Yechiel Michal ben Avraham haLevi Epstein (d. 1706) must not be confused with R. Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Yitzchak haLevi Epstein (1829-1908), the author of *Aruch haShulchan* (see section 2.6).

²²¹ Yosef Ashkenazi, *Keter Yosef*, Berlin, 1700.

²²² Online source: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=6036&st=&pgnum=1&hilite=>. Retrieved on 09 February 2023.

“condemned by rabbis, because of the many allusions to Shabbatai Tsevi” (Baumgarten 2007:82).

R. Yechiel Michal Epstein later produced another work, *Derech haYashar leOlam haBa* (*Correct Path to the World to Come*) which was written in Yiddish and intended for:

דיא גימיינע לייט און ווייבר

“simple readers and women” (R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, *Derech haYashar leOlam haBa*, 1683:2).²²³

R. Yechiel Michal Epstein’s reference to women is important because one of the innovative contributions of the *Sabbatian* movement was its elevation of the role of women in Judaism:

“Shabbatean theology gave a major role to women. This transformation could be seen, especially, in the aliyah of women in shul,²²⁴ the promotion of equality of sex and the participation of women...[in] circles of study. We have testimonies of Jewish women from Shabbatean circles who studied the Zohar in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Altona...” (Baumgarten 2007:87).²²⁵

On the other hand, it is also possible that R. Yechiel Michal Epstein simply wanted to be more inclusive in his range of readership, perhaps reflective of a more modern approach and not necessarily related to the *Sabbatian* elevation of women.²²⁶

²²³ Translation is mine.

²²⁴ This is a reference to women being called up to participate in the public reading of the Torah in synagogues which was traditionally the proclivity of men (and continues to be so in Orthodox synagogues today).

²²⁵ Square brackets are mine.

²²⁶ For more on an approach to Yiddish books which is divorced from any reference to *Sabbatianism*, promoting the Yiddish authors as having a “keen sense of mission...devotion to the reader...explicit intention to fight ignorance, and...belief that the diffusion of knowledge among the unlearned is a contribution to society as a whole,” see Turniansky (2008:5-18).

R. Yechiel Michal Epstein authored yet another work entitled *Kitzur Shelah*,²²⁷ which was first published in Fürth in 1683,²²⁸ and which may provide more evidence of his veiled *Sabbatian* leanings. The *Kitzur Shelah* is often consulted as a guidebook for customs and practices related to different times of the year. It is also regarded as the source for the common custom of reciting a Scriptural verse corresponding to one's Hebrew name (*pesukim lishmot anashim*) (see sections 3.1.11 and 4.6).²²⁹ Yet, despite its widespread reception, there were some surprising *Sabbatian* innuendos.

Eli Genauer (2011-) points out some of the rather obvious examples as to why the *Kitzur Shelah* came under *Sabbatian* suspicion. In the Author's Introduction to the 1707 Amsterdam edition of *Kitzur Shelah*, we find the following:

ויזכו ע"י הספר הזה לראות פני מלך משי"ח האמ"תי וגם יזכו אל ימו"ת משי"ח

"We should merit, through this book, to see the face of the true Messiah (משי"ח האמ"תי) and to further merit [to experience] the Messianic Era (ימו"ת משי"ח)..." (R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, *Kitzur Shelah*, 1707:Introduction).²³⁰

The unusual quotation marks in the middle of the words (which are not found in normal Hebrew usage), serve to draw emphasis to the words much like we would use italics in English. In this case, they are meant to alert the reader to oblique *Sabbatian* references. This technique, as we shall see, is common in *Sabbatian* literature as allusions could be made, particularly to Shabbatai Tzvi, while still presenting as an authoritative mainstream publication. Bezalel Naor (1999:48) alerts us to the

²²⁷ The *Kitzur Shelah* is often considered to be just an abridged version of the earlier moral and ethical work based on the weekly Torah portions, *Shnei Luchot haBrit* (*Two Tablets of the Covenant*) by R. Isaiah HaLevi Horowitz (c.1555-1630). However, *Kitzur Shelah* is indeed more of an independent work as it includes matters not dealt with in the original book (Genauer 2011-).

²²⁸ Sorotzkin (2022:24, n.14) maintains that *Kitzur Shelah* was first published in Fuerth in 1693. The Encyclopedia Judaica, entry "Epstein, Jehiel Michal, ben Abraham Halevi" by Horowitz (2007:473) has the first publishing of *Kitzur Shelah* as Fuerth in 1683.

²²⁹ In this construction, both the first and last letters of the chosen biblical verse correspond to the first and last letters of the individual's name. Technically, this custom is mentioned elsewhere, but *Kitzur Shelah* is the first to select and provide actual examples of the appropriately corresponding verses.

²³⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

significance of some of these *Sabbatian* undercurrents within the aforementioned text from *Kitzur Shelah*:

The expression ‘*the true Messiah*’ (משיח האמיתי) has a *gematria* or *numerical value* of 814, which corresponds to the well-known *gematria* of Shabbatai Tzvi (=814). The unusual markings draw the astute reader to this subtle reference. The next expression in the same sentence and similarly identified by the unusual markings, ‘*the Messianic Era*’ (ימות משיח) also has the *gematria* of 814. This last example is significant because in normal usage the expression ימות המשיח (with an extra letter ה) would be used instead of ימות משיח, but that would have thrown out the numerical calculation and given us 819 instead of 814. It does, therefore, seem that the intention was to specifically make the connection between 814 and Shabbatai Tzvi (=814).

I did notice that some sixteen years later, in the 1723 Frankfurt edition of *Kitzur Shelah*, the text was changed to read ימות המשיח (with the extra letter ה). This 1723 Frankfurt edition does, however, still retain the same quotation marks (although they are excluded from the word המשיח:

משיח האמיתי...ימות המשיח

This later edition may have attempted to partially ‘amend’ the earlier version.²³¹ As we move towards the later editions of *Kitzur Shelah*, these suspicious references are further hidden, if not removed entirely. The 1745 Frankfurt-am-Main edition, for example, has removed the entire Author’s Introduction. A more recent 1998 edition of *Kitzur Shelah* has completely altered the uncomfortable wording of the Introduction, to read as a more benign and neutral:

ויזכו על ידי הספר הזה לראות ביאת משיח צדקנו

“May we merit through this book to see the arrival of the righteous Messiah...” (R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, *Kitzur Shelah*, 1998:Introduction).

²³¹ I also noticed that the 1721 Amsterdam edition did not make any amendments and is the same as the 1707 Amsterdam text in this regard.

In this new 1998 edition, there is no indication at all of the problematic wording which plagued the earlier editions. There is also no indication or editorial note that the wording had been adjusted and did not appear in the original text.

Developing this notion of amending and sanitising earlier works with *Sabbatian* references, is another matter concerning the use of the expression *Nezer Rosheinu* (*crown* or *wreath of our heads*) when referring to the Messiah, also as found in the earlier 1707 Amsterdam edition of *Kitzur Shelah*. Towards the end of his book, R. Yechiel Michal Epstein writes:

הש"ת ישלח לנו נזר ראשינו ויקבץ נדחינו

“May God, blessed be He, send us the crown of our head [*Nezer Rosheinu*] and gather our scattered [people]...” (R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, *Kitzur Shelah*, 1707).

The expression *Nezer Rosheinu* (נזר ראשינו), *crown of our head*, which is used to describe the Messiah, is a suspicious phraseology. Genauer (2011-) wrote to Sid (Shnayer) Leiman asking for clarity on this expression within a possible *Sabbatian* context, and this is Leiman’s response:

“...Kitzur Shelah is a Sabbatian work. It is suffused with Sabbatian material, so one needn’t look for evidence just at the beginning and end” (Genauer 2011-).

Leiman indicates that it is not only he, who identifies the work as *Sabbatian*, but at least two other earlier rabbinical scholars did so as well.²³² Leiman also speaks to the expression *Nezer Rosheinu* (*crown of our head*) and he is adamant that the expression is indeed *Sabbatian* in nature (although he does caution that the 1707 Amsterdam edition is the *fourth* edition and therefore may not be entirely accurate because usually, one needs to look at the first *three* editions).

Leiman, nevertheless, makes two observations concerning the spelling of *Rosheinu* (ראשינו/ראשנו):

²³² Leiman states that both R. Yechezkel Katzenellenbogen (early eighteenth century) and R. Kregil (*Shem haGedoloim haShalem*, vol. 2, 1774:148) identified *Kitzur Shelah* as a *Sabbatian* work.

1) The 1707 Amsterdam edition used גזר ראשינו, which because of the extra letter “yud” (=10), has the *gematria* of 824 (a common *Sabbatian* code number corresponding to the numerical value of ה”ה שבתי צבי, where ה”ה stands for המלך, the King Messiah Shabbatai Tzvi).

2) It is also possible that the original manuscript read ראשנו (=814=Shabbatai Tzvi) and that the printer misspelt it as ראשינו.

Either way, according to Leiman, both 824 and 814 are common and ‘sacred’ numbers for *Sabbatians*, and the readers would have picked up on these numerical nuances. Most importantly, this reference to *Nezer Rosheinu* was clearly disconcerting and considered a problem because in the recent 1998 Ashdod publication of *Kitzur Shelah*, “the offensive phrase has been censored and replaced” (Leiman cited in Genauer 2011-).

R. Yechiel Michal Epstein’s book, *Kitzur Shelah*, appears in R. Yakov Emden’s work, *Torat haKenaot*, as part of a list of suspicious *Sabbatian* works. R. Yakov Emden was forthright in expressing his profound dislike of the books by R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, referring to him and his prayer book in a derogatory manner, without the honorific title, ‘Rabbi’:

ובס’ תפלה של עפשטיין

“And in the prayer book of Epstein...” (R. Yakov Emden, *Torat haKenaot*, 1870:144).²³³

R. Yakov Emden also refuses to even name the title of R. Yechiel Michal Epstein’s prayer book. The vitriol is accelerated as it is further directed against R. Yechiel Michal Epstein’s other work, the *Kitzur Shelah*:

גם רמז על הצוא”ה בהקדמת קשל”ה

“And there is also a hint to this [*Sabbatian*] excrement at the beginning of his *Kitzur Shelah*” (R. Yakov Emden, *Torat haKenaot*, 1870:144).²³⁴

²³³ Translation is mine.

²³⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

This is an unusually strong language not often found in rabbinic parlance. It illustrates the intense bitterness of the opposition that this widely accepted work had aroused. One further notices the familiar quotation marks, which were typically used by *Sabbatians* to allude to their ideology, also being used sarcastically by R. Yakov Emden. He seems to have intended for the reader to detect that the word צוא"ה (excrement) – which as the quotation marks indicate – has the *gematria* of 102, conveniently corresponding to the numerical value of 'Tzvi.'

Notwithstanding all these observations and nuances, R. Yechiel Michal Epstein wanted his work to reach and influence the masses. He openly writes about his reason for writing his *Kitzur Shelah*:

רק כונתי שתמלא הארץ דעה לא לאותן אשר המה יותר מערכי רק להפחותים

מערכי לאותן הדרים בישובים ובכפרים

"My only intention is to further knowledge, not among those of stature but among those of less status, who reside in settlement and villages"
(R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, *Kitzur Shelah*, 1707:Introduction).²³⁵

4.3.1 Synthesis

Kitzur Shelah, in my view, is another example of this popular *genre* of what Bezalel Naor (1999) has termed "*Post-Sabbatian Sabbatianism*." It represents a prevalent style and strategy bent on furthering *Sabbatian* ideology under the cover of spreading mainstream Judaism to the masses and the simple folk. The fact that these works were well-received not just by the masses, but by significant swathes of the rabbinic world as well, shows how this approach had easily infiltrated deeply within the nascent and burgeoning thought of the era. To emphasise how popular the *Kitzur Shelah* was, the Yiddish edition alone, first published in 1743, was reprinted over forty times (Sorotzkin 2022:24, n.14). This was in the same era (and area) that gave rise to *Chassidism* which similarly focused on simple people in "*settlements and villages*," and which was deeply grounded in the popular theology of the time. In keeping with this study's *literature and personalities approach*, we now investigate another popular

²³⁵ Translation is mine.

work from that period, the *Kav haYashar* by R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, which Baumgarten (2007:91) describes as a “*proto-Hasidic text*.”

4.4 R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover and his *Kav haYashar* (1705)

In 1705, R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover (d. 1712) published his *Kav haYashar* (*Just Measure* or *Direct Light*)²³⁶ and it had been reprinted fifty times by the twentieth century. This book became one of the most popular works of the time and is described as a “*best-seller in the Jewish book market*” (Feiner 2010:31). More poignantly, it has also been described as the most popular ethical (*mussar*) work in the past three hundred years (Davis 2007:xxvii). Yet, despite its tremendous popularity, Baumgarten (2007:77) writes rather ambiguously:

“Several indications *prove* that the author *could*²³⁷ be related to the Shabbatean movement.”

One of these “*indications*” is to be found in the very title of the book. It will be recalled (see section 2.2.6) that in the teachings of R. Natan of Gaza, during creation, the primordial light was divided into *אור שיש בו מחשבה* (*light that has thought*) and *אור שאין בו מחשבה* (*light that has no thought*). This primordial light was beamed into the *Tehiru* (*vacated space*) in a pencil-thin and *straight ray* known as the *Kav haYashar*.

Baumgarten (2009:26), however, refers not to the primordial light entering in a ‘straight-line’ but rather sees it as rising “*in the ‘right quantity’ (kav ha-yashar) to the space (tehiru) created after the tsimtsum*.” In this sense, the *Kav* is not necessarily *thin* or *straight* but *appropriate* and *proportionate* enough to facilitate creation.²³⁸

I would suggest an expanded interpretation where the *Kav haYashar* may be an allusion to the Messiah himself, whose role according to *Sabbatian Kabbalah*, is to enter the *Tehiru* and tame the *light that has no thought* (see section 2.2.6). This may

²³⁶ *Kav* can mean *measure* and *Yashar* can mean *just* (i.e., *Just Measure*). *Kav* can also mean *light* and *Yashar* can mean *direct* (i.e., *Direct Light*). The latter reading can refer to a detail in the mystical process of *Tzimtzum* (*contraction*) relating to the act of creation, as will be explained below.

²³⁷ Italics are mine to emphasise Baumgarten’s apparent ‘caution’ in categorising Koidanover as a *Sabbatian*.

²³⁸ In other words, the primordial light is not overly powerful that it destroys creation, nor too weak that it cannot affect creation.

be why the word *Yashar* (=the just one. i.e., the Messiah) features so prominently in the titles of these works.²³⁹

A stronger indication of a possible *Sabbatian* association with *Kav haYashar* is the open reference to R. Yehuda Chasid (see section 3.1.3):

ובן שמעתי אומרים בשם החסיד ר' יהודה משידלאווצ"א ז"ל

“And I heard it was said in the name of the Chasid R. Yehuda of Sziedlow, of blessed memory...” (R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, *Kav haYashar*, 1705: Ch 11).²⁴⁰

R. Yehuda Chasid (d. c.1700) was also known as the *Magid of Sziedlow*. The term *Magid* in the *Sabbatian* context relates to a “moral instructor” allied with study circles of *Sabbatian* groups (Baumgarten 2007:83).

I will paraphrase the very teaching brought in the *Kav haYashar* in the name of R. Yehuda Chasid, as an example of the particular style and substance of this popular mystico-ethical work:

“Those who are unfaithful to their wives and travel to faraway places...when they eventually decide to return home, they are attacked by bandits and have all their possessions stolen. These men do not realise that with each drop of spilt seed, they created a demon who now returns to attack them in the form of humans” (R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, *Kav haYashar*, 1705: Ch 11).²⁴¹

Shmuel Feiner describes the general style of the “*mussar*” (*ethical*) content of *Kav haYashar* quite colourfully as a “*tirade*,” and writes that:

²³⁹ It is of interest to note that R. Yechiel Michal Epstein’s *Seder Tefila Derech Yeshara* and *Derech haYashar leOlam haBa* (see section 4.3) as well as R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover’s *Kav haYashar* all reference the word **Yashar** in the titles of their works, perhaps supporting this messianic allusion. On the other hand, in the case of *Kav haYashar*, it is possible that *haYashar* (הישר), having the same Hebrew letters as *Hirsh* (הירש), simply alludes to the author’s name, Tzvi *Hirsh*. Additionally, *Kav* (קב) having the numerical value of 102, may correspond to *Tzvi* which also has the numerical value of 102 (as in *Tzvi*=102=**Kav**, *Hirsh*=**haYashar** Koidanover) (Online source: https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Koidanover_Aharon_Shemuel_and_Tsevi_Hirsh. Retrieved on 27 April 2023). Then again, by the same token, I suggest that *Kav haYashar* may allude to (Shabbatai) *Tzvi*=102=**Kav**, who represents the *Yashar*, the *Sabbatian* notion of the just (*Yashar*) Messiah entering and taming the *Tehiru* (vacated space).

²⁴⁰ Translation is mine.

²⁴¹ Paraphrase and translation are mine.

“Koidanover *intimidated*²⁴² his readers and called on sinners to save their souls from horrible punishments in hell and to guard against temptation, defilement, and a materialistic mode of life” (Feiner 2010:31).

Another example of the harsh punishments awaiting the sinner is the following:

“After that dead person has been buried, the angel appointed to restore his soul grasps him violently, smashes his skull, pulls out his eyes, and subjects him to bitter and harsh torments” (R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, *Kav haYashar*, 1705: Ch 2).²⁴³

In any event, there is no doubt concerning the *Sabbatian* affiliations of R. Yehuda Chasid for whom testimonials exist:

“from around 1700, about the holy brotherhood (havruta qedoshah) of Yehuda Hassid, a group of Sabbateans, known as Hassidim, who were opposed to the authority of the rabbis and leaders of the kehilot [communities] and were given to extreme ascetism and Messianic speculations” (Baumgarten 2009:27).²⁴⁴

Besides this open reference to the known *Sabbatian* R. Yehuda Chasid, *Kav haYashar* has an even more overt reference to another important *Sabbatian* leader, R. Heshil Tzoref (see sections 2.5.1.1, and 4.7) who R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover acknowledges as the source for one of the teachings in his *Kav haYashar*:

According to R. Heshil Tzoref’s teaching, Poland is considered impure because it is compared to Edom and Esau. Jews must suffer in Poland until the time of the Messiah who will first appear in the *Tzafon* (north). The north corresponds to Poland and Lithuania where the earlier Khmelnytsky persecutions took place (see section 2.5.1.1):

כי צפון הוא גימטריא פולין ליט"א

²⁴² Italics are mine for emphasis.

²⁴³ Translation by Chaya Naor (Feiner 2010:33).

²⁴⁴ Square brackets are mine. The similarities between R. Yehuda Chasid’s followers, called *Chassidim* and their group known as the *Chavruta Kedosha* [or *Chavura Kedosha*, as Maciejko (2010b:n.p.) refers to the group] may have been paralleled by the later colleagues of the Baal Shem Tov who belonged to a group known as the *Chevraya Kadisha*. These may all be variations of the same name and organisation.

“for *Tsafon* [North = 226 in numerical value] corresponds to Polin [Poland = 176] plus Lita [Lithuania = 50] [i.e., 176+50=226] [and then the redemption will spread to the south]” (R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, *Kav haYashar*, 1705: Ch 102).²⁴⁵

R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover explains:

ע"פ מה ששמעתי מפה קדוש ה"ה האיש האלהי מוהר"ר העשיל צורף ז"ל שאמר
בשם מקובל א'...והנה יש בידי עוד דברי כבושים שאין אני רוצה לגלותם מפני כל
אדם כי אים לצנועין מה שקבלתי מן האיש האלהי מוהר"ר העשיל צורף ז"ל

“[This aforementioned teaching is] in accordance with what I have heard from the holy mouth of the holy one, the righteous rabbi, divine man, our master the rabbi, R. Heshil Tzoref, of blessed memory, who transmitted [the teaching] *in the name of a certain Kabbalist*²⁴⁶...and I also have in my hands further persuasive words – which I do not want to reveal in the presence of just anyone, but only to the modest [or ‘secret’ Sabbatians?]²⁴⁷ – that I received from the divine man...R. Heshil Tzoref...” (R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, *Kav haYashar*, 1705:Ch 102).²⁴⁸

I offer one observation and then ask two questions on this excerpt from *Kav haYashar*:

- 1) It seems to me that R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover not only quotes R. Heshil Tzoref, but knew him personally because he states that he “*heard*” (ששמעתי) this teaching “*from the holy mouth*” of R. Heshil Tzoref. Contrast this expression with his description of the teaching he took from R. Yehuda Chasid, where he doesn’t mention that he heard it from his mouth but rather that he “*heard it was said in the name of the Chasid R. Yehuda.*” If this observation is correct, and R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover knew, and had heard teaching directly from, R. Heshil

²⁴⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

²⁴⁶ Italics are mine for emphasis (see further in the text for my speculation as to who this “*certain Kabbalist*” may be alluding to).

²⁴⁷ Square brackets suggesting a possible alternate interpretation of “*modest*” (*Tzenuin*) in this context, are mine.

²⁴⁸ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Tzoref, then we have demonstrated the existence of a direct link between a known leader of the *Sabbatian* movement and the author of *Kav haYashar*.

2) R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover informs us that the abovementioned teaching (on the matter of *gematria* or *numerology* where *Tzafron* = Poland + Lithuania=226) that he heard from R. Heshil Tzoref, was something he (Tzoref) had originally heard from a certain unnamed “*Mekubal*” or *Kabbalist* (מקובל א'). One wonders why in a work that is careful to record the provenance of its teachings, the name of the *Kabbalist* is not mentioned or perhaps even withheld. In an environment where *Sabbatians* were the *Maaminin* (*Believers*), and the *Kabbalists* or *Mekubalim* were often (predominantly?) *Sabbatian* mystics, who was this obscure and unnamed *Kabbalist* (*Mekubal*)? Could it have been a veiled reference to a teaching of Shabbatai Tzvi or R. Natan of Gaza?

3) This air of secrecy is further exacerbated by R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover's claim that he had in his possession, additional teachings or possibly even written texts (implied by the expression “*in my hands*”)²⁴⁹ that he does not wish to reveal to just anyone – only to the *modest* (*tzenuin*). The “*modest*” may be an allusion to the hidden and trustworthy *Sabbatian* mystics. Astoundingly, R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover goes on to openly declare that he had received these secret teachings/texts from the same R. Heshil Tzoref. Might this mean that R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover was referring to the enigmatic work (or parts thereof) by R. Heshil Tzoref known as *Sefer haTzoref* (see section 4.7.1) which no less a figure than the Baal Shem Tov is also said to have possessed and admired (Rabinowitsch 1941:81)?

Some would, no doubt, counter that the expression *tzenuin* (the *modest*) does not allude to *Sabbatians* but simply refers to humble seekers of mystical truths, a throwback to earlier times when the study of mysticism was restricted to the worthy elite. Baumgarten tends to adopt such an interpretation. He supports this notion by quoting the Yiddish translation of *Kav haYashar*, where *tzenuin* (the *modest*) is depicted as *frumer lait* (*religious, pious or orthodox adherents*). Baumgarten (2007:80-81) writes:

²⁴⁹ It seems to me that he would not have used the phrase “*I also have in my hands*” if he was simply referring to oral teachings.

“Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover distinguishes two ways of transmitting the Kabbalah, one for the initiated and one for the less learned readers...”

However, I would argue that: 1) by the time *Kav haYashar* was translated into Yiddish (1709)²⁵⁰ mysticism was well on the way to being sufficiently democratised and already the proclivity of the masses; and 2) the society was so saturated with secret *Sabbatians* who made concerted attempts to publish what appeared to be mainstream writings yet interspersed them with allusions to *Sabbatian* teachings, that works like *Kav haYashar* would be no different. I suggest that had R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover revealed more of the teachings or writings of R. Heshil Tzoref that he admitted he already had *in his hands*; it would have unequivocally exposed their *Sabbatian* nature. And Baumgarten (2007:82), in any case, acknowledges that:

“[m]any of the most influential moral preachers and authors of moral literature of a radical ascetic bent were secret Shabbateans.”

Much of the didactic style of *Kav haYashar* revolves around stories, a medium soon to be adopted by the *Chassidic* movement which also had *Magidim* as *moralistic preachers* who told stories. This represented a shift from a more technical study of mysticism to a form that was readily consumable by the less scholarly and ordinary members of the population:

“Koidanover introduced major differences in the traditional pattern of the sermon. He founded his discourse mostly on mystical references removed from their original sources and rewritten for simple readers” (Baumgarten 2007:84).

For these reasons, I don’t think R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover, by withholding further teachings from R. Heshil Tzoref, was shielding the less worthy masses from mystical teachings – as might have been the case in earlier Jewish history – instead, I interpret this as his shielding himself and his group from overt references to *Sabbatianism*. I, therefore, understand *tzenuin* (the *modest*) to refer to ‘modest’ or ‘secret’ *Sabbatians*. I further suggest that it might not have been unusual for the Yiddish translation to use the expression of *frumer lait* (*orthodox adherents*) even in reference to *Sabbatians*

²⁵⁰ The Hebrew edition came out in 1705.

who already referred to themselves as *Maaminim* (*Believers*) and would have wanted to project and maintain such a mainstream image.

4.5 R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch and his *Nachalat Tzvi* (1711)

Another popular Yiddish work to emerge at this time was *Nachalat Tzvi*, also known as *Taitch Zohar* (Yiddish *Zohar*).²⁵¹ It was a translation of the original Aramaic *Zohar* into Yiddish and was so popular that, like *Kav haYashar*, it had also been reprinted fifty times by the twentieth century.²⁵² This work was the result of a long process begun by R. Aviezer Zelig Chotsch in 1601 but was later rewritten and published in a simpler format in 1711, by his great-grandson, R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch. Boaz Huss (2016:94) identifies R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch as a “*Sabbatean sage*.” Baumgarten (2007:89) refers to him as a *Sabbatian* “*maggid*.”

The frontispiece of this Yiddish work demonstrates that it was directed towards the populace – unlike earlier translations of the Aramaic *Zohar* into Hebrew and Latin which were intended for mystical scholars. The work cites the popular call of Deuteronomy (31:12): “*Assemble the people, men, women and little ones and the sojourner within your gates so that they may hear,*” indicating the work was directed to the masses.

The *Haskama* (Approval) by R. Naftali haCohen Katz of Frankfurt (who was also a *Baal Shem*, see section 2.4.2) confirms that *Nachalat Tzvi* was indeed specifically intended for the masses:

“He [i.e., R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch] wishes to print here peshatim [simple meanings] and words of moral from the Book of Zohar in the language of Ashkenaz [i.e., Yiddish] to merit the masses, the young and the old, the women and the simple people...” (Approval to R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch, *Nachalat Tzvi*, 1711).²⁵³

R. Naftali haCohen Katz’s *Haskama* is in keeping with the ambiguous approaches of some of the official rabbinic figures towards *Sabbatians* (see section 3.1.11).

²⁵¹ *Taitch* in Yiddish literally means *interpretation* or *translation*.

²⁵² From around the nineteenth century, it was produced under the title *Nofet Tzufim* (Baumgarten 2007:84).

²⁵³ Approval of R. Naftali haCohen Katz. Translation by Huss (2016:94). Square brackets are mine.

Surprisingly, although not uncommon, his “*attitude to Shabbatai Tsvi was certainly hostile*” yet he still, “*gave his approval (haskamot) to various Sabbatean works*” (Baumgarten 2009:26).

In another *Haskama*, however, this time by R. Wolf of Dessau, a distinctly messianic element is evident:

“[H]e [i.e., Chotsch], thought to print revealed articles from the Book of the Zohar, in the language understood by women and those whose strength is as women’s [i.e., the less-learned men], so that they will know God and the land will be filled with knowledge. As it is written in the holy Book of the Zohar: ‘When the days of the Messiah are near, even children will explore the secrets of wisdom.’”²⁵⁴ (Approbation to R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch, *Nachalat Tzvi*, 1711).²⁵⁵

The Introduction to *Nachalat Tzvi* shows how tremendous effort was taken to keep the text simple and accessible to the people:

“when an ordinary man (gemeyner man) wants to study Zohar, he will choose the ethical teachings (muser), the revealed parts, the simple words (devorim peshutim) and stories according to the literal meaning (deyrekh peshute)” (R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch, *Nachalat Tzvi*, 1711:Introduction).²⁵⁶

Baumgarten (2007:88) sees this as more than just a simplification to make the text of the *Zohar* more accessible to ordinary people. Instead, he refers to an active attempt at the “*dismembering of the Zohar*” which he explains was the beginning of a movement away from the traditional textual authority of the *Zohar*. It was “*a form of de-canonization*” and “*de-sacralisation*” which gave more open and free access to mysticism, without the need to go through traditional *Kabbalists*. One could perhaps take this notion a step further and say that the *de-sacralisation* of, and move away from, the technical *Zohar*, might have been a way of *sanctifying* the *Sabbatian Kabbalah* in its place.

²⁵⁴ *Zohar* I:117b.

²⁵⁵ Approbation of Dessau. Translation by Huss (2016:95). Square brackets are mine.

²⁵⁶ Translation by Baumgarten (2007:86).

A convincing indication of the *Sabbatian* affiliations of R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch is evident from a report that in 1696 when passing through Prossnitz, he was instrumental in introducing R. Leibele Prossnitz – who later claimed he was *Mashiach ben Yosef* – to the *Sabbatian* doctrine (see section 3.1.6) (Baumgarten 2009:27).

4.5.1 Synthesis

According to Baumgarten (2007:87), both R. Tzvi Hirsh Koidanover (*Kav haYashar*) and R. Tzvi Hirsh Chotsch (*Nachalat Tzvi*) were mutually associated and “*linked to the circle of Heschel Tsoref*”. It is of immense significance that these Yiddish texts are ultimately connected to R. Heshil Tsoref, who, as I later argue, acts as the ‘link’ between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* (see section 4.7). Furthermore, like *Nachalat Tzvi*:

“most of the commentaries on the Zohar that were printed during this period were written by Sabbateans” (Huss 2016:95).

Both *Kav haYashar* and *Nachalat Tzvi*, although perhaps not produced exclusively for *Sabbatians*:

“were read and interpreted by prophets, visionaries and itinerant preachers in order to spread religious propaganda related to the return of Shabbatai Tsevi” (Baumgarten 2009:25).

Yiddish mystico-ethical texts served as a literary ‘*bridge*’ between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*. Most of these Yiddish texts were produced just before the rise of the *Chassidic* movement. It was no coincidence that Yiddish was the *vernacular* and the *Chassidic* movement was a movement for the *people*. These extremely popular Yiddish texts reveal how “*new groups of readers on the fringes*” were able to spread mysticism in a manner “*that escaped the control of the rabbis*” and that created an “*alternative sociability*” (Baumgarten 2007:90).

Many of these mystico-ethical Yiddish works were not just translations of previous texts but were framed in the form of didactic sermons focused on appealing directly to the reader, making this a very powerful *genre* for the dissemination of new ideas. The average individuals as well as those in leadership positions were equally confronted and chastised for their deviant behaviour which, it was claimed, only gave

more dominance to the forces of evil. Their errant behaviour served to “*disturb the cosmic order, prolong the exile...and...delay redemption*” (Baumgarten 2009:28).

It appears as though the masses, one way or another were being prepared and targeted for a new wave of mystical and messianic teachings. In hindsight, we know that this trend, largely a spin-off from *Sabbatianism*, was something soon to be successfully capitalised upon by the *Chassidic* movement.²⁵⁷ These popular Yiddish texts opened the way and prepared the ground for the dissemination of *Chassidic* ideology to the people. Baumgarten (2007:91) describes *Kav haYashar*, particularly as a “*proto-Hasidic text in Yiddish.*” Later, when some of the early *Chassidic* works began to emerge, the “*terminology, beliefs and conceptions*” were already known and the society was ready and receptive to these new teachings. Moshe Idel (2002:150-152) shows that many themes, which later become the hallmarks of *Chassidism*, like *Deveikut* (*attachment to God*), *Kavana* (*intent*), *Hitbodedut* (*solitude*) and *Hamshacha* (*drawing down of holiness*) are all found in *Kav haYashar*.

Zeev Gries (1996:141) points out that early *Chassidism*, before its literature was captured in rabbinic Hebrew, made use almost entirely of Yiddish as the means of transmission of its ideology:

“Much of the vast literature of hasidism was derived from the verbal addresses, sermons or homiletic discourses in Yiddish – delivered by the leaders of the movement to the gatherings of their followers at their ‘courts’...”

This way, ideas could have easily and naturally been transferable from *Sabbatian* Yiddish texts to *Chassidic* thought, and initially, the style and medium would have remained unchanged.

As we have seen, the popular Yiddish mystico-ethical texts appear to have served as agents of theological transmission, sometimes subtly and other times more overtly, to transfer elements of *Sabbatian* ideology to the next receptive phase of Jewish mystical thought and development. However, Yiddish texts were not the only means of achieving this end as other ‘mainstream’ Hebrew rabbinic texts may also

²⁵⁷ *Chassidism* certainly offered mysticism. However, for a discussion on the extent of *Chassidism*’s messianism, see section 2.5.3.

have enabled a similar outcome. It is to one of these Hebrew texts that we now turn our attention.

4.6 The anonymous work *Chemdat Yamim* (1731)

A major, yet controversial eighteenth-century work that had, and continues to have, a large impact on Jews and Jewish practices relating to the seasonal holy days and festivals, is *Chemdat Yamim* (*Best of Days*). It was first printed in Izmir in 1731–32 by R. Yisrael Yakov ben Tom Tov Algazi who did not name the author (Fogel 2015:365). Shneur Sachs (1872:519) is convinced of R. Yisrael Algazi's *Sabbatian* intentions and notes that Algazi contributed his own funds towards the publishing of *Chemdat Yamim*. It was then printed another five times over the next few years. The “*question of authorship remains one of the great mysteries in Jewish bibliography*” (Dan 2007:804).

Parts of the work seem to be missing,²⁵⁸ possibly including a section dealing with ordinary weekdays, but the extant version deals with the special holy days in the Jewish calendar (Dan 2007:804). This work became very popular because:

“[t]he writings offer examples of some of the best rhetoric in Jewish homiletics, and the beauty of the sermons helped to endear the work to all readers” (Dan 2007:804).

The work also had mystical appeal as, based upon *Lurianic Kabbalah*, it explained the cosmic significance of earthy deeds and *Mitzvot* (*religious observances*). *Chemdat Yamim* became one of the primary sources for the popular *Tikunim* (*spiritual rectification techniques*) and prayer literature of the eighteenth century. The uniqueness of this work lies in its merging of ethical and mystical concepts (as we saw in the previous sections) with intricate *Halachic* details, all within the same cover (Fogel 2015:365).

Concerning the alleged *Sabbatian* provenance of *Chemdat Yamim*, while some scholars like Moshe Fogel (2015:365-422) have challenged this assertion, Joseph Dan (2007:804) is convinced that:

²⁵⁸ The copyist makes references to sections that appear to be missing by writing: חבל על דאבדן, “*Woe to that which is lost*,” in a number of places. This only adds to the intrigue because we don’t know whether these missing sections would have confirmed or repudiated the allegations of its *Sabbatian* origins.

“the author was a Shabbatean [because] [s]cholars have detected many Shabbatean ideas and allusions hidden in the work.”²⁵⁹

Scholem (1955:79) is also convinced that *Chemdat Yamim* is a *Sabbatian* work, due to its prayers and customs which resemble those of R. Natan of Gaza,²⁶⁰ its specific *Sabbatian* numerologies, and its general messianic content. Tishby (1979:585) similarly considers *Chemdat Yamim* to be linked to *Sabbatianism*.

Initially, it was thought that the author may have been R. Natan of Gaza because of three apparent acronyms of his name which are found in the book. R. Yakov Emden took this position as well. Fogel (2015:372,376), however, argues that references to R. Natan of Gaza, in general, were quite ubiquitous during the eighteenth century, even among opponents of *Sabbatianism*. For this reason, Fogel insists, such references would have been no indication of the *Sabbatian* nature of the work.

Some saw the possibility of affecting a *Tikun*, or taking spiritual remedial action as it were, on behalf of R. Natan of Gaza and his *Sabbatian* writing, thereby ‘elevating’ him back to a position of standing. Meir Benayahu (1973:223), for example, maintains that the printer, R. Yisrael Yakov Algazi, was one of “*the Kabbalists who restored [Chemdat Yamim] to the Kabbalah of the Ari [Lurianic Kabbalah] ...and removed the blemishes.*”

Those who believed R. Natan of Gaza had authored *Chemdat Yamim* referred to him as *haRav Chemdat Yamim* (R. *Chemdat Yamim*) as rabbis are often referred to by the titles of their books. However, Isaiah Tishby has shown that the writer used some works published only after the eighteenth century, ruling out the possibility of R. Natan of Gaza as the author. This would place the date of the writing to be from around the third decade of the eighteenth century (Dan 2007:804). Either way, already from the mid-eighteenth century, the polemics surrounding allegations of *Sabbatian* content began to appear (Fogel 2015:366).

Many are unaware of just how influential this book is, as many common Jewish practices today are taken from *Chemdat Yamim*. To some significant extent, *Chemdat Yamim* shaped aspects of the festivals as we know them, including some liturgies and practices (Yaari 1963:98). Sometimes these practices were known before and were

²⁵⁹ Square brackets are mine.

²⁶⁰ According to Scholem (1948:42) *Chemdat Yamim* is undisputedly a *Sabbatian* work, although he does not believe it was written by R. Natan of Gaza.

simply publicised and encouraged by the book. Other times these practices appear to have been original innovations.²⁶¹ Yaari (1963:99) suggests that *Chemdat Yamim* created an entirely new festival around *Tu Bishvat* (the *Fifteenth of Shevat*)²⁶² and in some circles, it was revered more than the other festivals enumerated in the Torah.

In a book specifically written for the festivals, it is surprising that other than a cursory remark here and there, there is no mention of the *Three Weeks* (the mourning period for the Temple between the two fasts of the *Seventeenth of Tamuz* and the *Ninth of Av*). This strange omission may be significant, as one of the first things Shabbatai Tzvi did was to abolish these two fasts. He did this because he claimed he was the Messiah and there was no longer a need to mourn the destruction of the Temple. Furthermore, in *Kabbalistic* literature, each of the 365 negative commandments of the Torah corresponds to a different day of the year. Accordingly, the date of *Tisha beAv* corresponds to the prohibition of eating the hind quarter. Shabbatai Tzvi made a point of specifically breaking this commandment and eating the hind quarter. It is subtleties and anomalies like this that have aroused suspicions of *Chemdat Yamim's* Sabbatian origins.

Fogel (2015:382) argues that the anonymous authorship of *Chemdat Yamim* was not the consequence of a Sabbatian hiding his allegiance, but rather an intended strategy to create an air of “*hidden holiness*” by withholding his identity. Fogel suggests that this mystical aura is reflected in R. Yisrael Algazi's words of introduction:

²⁶¹ These innovations include: The widespread custom of reciting Psalm 27, *LeDavid haShem Ori* during the prayers from the beginning of the month of *Elul* until the end of the festive period. Although there are slightly earlier sources that reference this, it seems that *Chemdat Yamim* formalised this practice; The custom of celebrating *Tu Bishvat* (the 15th of the Hebrew month of *Shevat* – the ‘New Year’ for trees) the way many do today with a special *Seder* (ceremony) for eating fruits; The custom (of some *Chassidim*) to count the first day of the *Omer* (the period between Passover and Pentecost) only after the *Pesach Seder* (ceremony); The custom, as included in many *siddurim* (prayer books) today, to recite the *Ke Gavna* (passages from the *Zohar*) on Friday evenings after *Lecha Dodi* (the hymn welcoming in the Sabbath); Some aspects of the *Tashlich* ceremony on *Rosh Hashana* are also attributed to *Chemdat Yamim*; Welcoming the *Ushpizim*, or *spiritual guests* who are said to visit the *Sukah* on the Festival *Sukot* (Tabernacles); And the order of the *Hakafot*, or *circling* of the synagogue on the Festival of *Simchat Torah* (following immediately after Tabernacles).

²⁶² Yaari (1963:99) mentions that in more recent times, Menachem Zulai had discovered fragments dating back to *Gaonic* times (589-1038 CE) indicating that *Tu Bishvat* was already an elaborate festival with special prayers resembling those of the formal *Shemona Esrei* (a primary prayer recited during the three daily prayer services). However, this discovery of fragments was a more recent discovery, and the author(s) of *Chemdat Yamim* would not have been aware of it when they compiled the book in around 1731.

ספר חמדת ימים כתב איש רבי מופת הדור והדרו הרב דומה למלאך חלק אלוה
ממעל...את קולו שמענו ואותו לא ידענו...ואת שמו לא הגיד שמו ושם עירו...והנה
איש בא ניצב לקראתי ובידו האי ספרא...ויאמר אלי לך חזק וקני חמדה גנוזה

“The book *Chemdat Yamim* was written by a rabbi, a wonder of the generation. And the rabbi’s glory resembled that of an angel, a part of God above...we heard his voice but we did not see him...and he did not mention his name or his city...Behold, a man came and stood over me and in his hand was this book, and he told me to go in strength, and I acquired a hidden treasure” (*Chemdat Yamim*, Introduction to the Festivals).²⁶³

R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, who as we saw earlier was accused of being a secret *Sabbatian* (see section 3.1.7), gave his *Haskama* (Approbation) to *Chemdat Yamim*, and not surprisingly, the *Sabbatian* expositor R. Yakov Emden, who refers to the anonymous author as a *Magosh* (sorcerer), writes:

ספר חמדת הימים כל שורות הספר מינות

“Every line of the book *Chemdat Yamim* is [Sabbatian]²⁶⁴ heresy...”
(R. Yakov Emden, *Torat haKenaot*, 1870:144).

Fogel (2015:369) observes that there are no indications that objections were raised to the apparent *Sabbatian* material in *Chemdat Yamim* during the period spanning the first two editions of the work (Izmir 1731-1732 and Kushta 1735-1737). This would tie in with the often evident yet strange rabbinic ambiguity towards *Sabbatianism*, which points to just how porous the borders between *Sabbatianism* and mainstream orthodoxy sometimes were (see section 3.1.11). Fogel claims it was only after R. Yakov Emden’s outcry against *Chemdat Yamim* in the 1730s, that its *Sabbatian content* became an issue.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Translation is mine.

²⁶⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine. R. Yakov Emden goes on to reference many *Sabbatian* ideas and numerologies which he claims are to be found in *Chemdat Yamim*.

²⁶⁵ It was from around the 1730’s that the suspicions concerning R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s *Sabbatian* affiliations began to spread (see section 3.1.10). Fogel (2015:369) suggests that the Luzzatto event may have sparked repercussions that affected the reception of *Chemdat Yamim*. If this is correct, then, the opposition to *Chemdat Yamim* would have been more a result of the spirit of the times than the objection to the actual content of the work. Yaari (1954:135) maintains the opposition to *Chemdat Yamim* from the *Chassidim* was only awakened from around 1752, when R. Yakov Emden became embroiled in his conflict with R.

The third edition²⁶⁶ of *Chemdat Yamim*, published in the known *Sabbatian* stronghold of Zolkiew (1742-1746), introduced many changes to the work. Each case concerned the removal of suspicious *Sabbatian* content, including the name “Tzvi” and some hymns by R. Natan of Gaza (Yaari 1954:88). Yaari maintains that these omissions were made more specifically in the context of a clamp down on *witchcraft*, albeit indirectly – but not directly – related to *Sabbatianism*, that was ongoing in Zolkiew at that time. There was even a note in the frontispiece proclaiming that experts had checked the text and removed references that were “*against the accepted law*”.

The fifth edition of *Chemdat Yamim* published in Livorno (1759-1764) included *Teshuvot (responsa)* of R. Moshe Zacut, as well as some previously conspicuously absent matters concerning the three-week mourning period for the Temple (Fogel 2015:369). Although we have shown that R. Moshe Zacut had a brush with *Sabbatianism* and was the teacher of R. Avraham Rovigo (see section 3.1.1), Fogel nevertheless argues that these additions primarily appear to be attempts made expressly to characterise *Chemdat Yamim* as a non-*Sabbatian* work.

These new references to the Three Weeks of Mourning for the Temple in the Livorno edition, however, were not included in a contemporaneous publishing of *Chemdat Yamim* in Venice in 1763. This edition appears to have been openly *Sabbatian* as the names of the printer and the city are not disclosed, nor are any approbations presented.

Despite all these remedial modifications and insinuations, Fogel (2015:384) persists in adopting the position that the work is not essentially of a *Sabbatian* nature. He acknowledges that sections were gleaned from *Sabbatian* sources and even from R. Natan of Gaza, but he insists that the latter simply took many of those ideas directly from *Lurianic Kabbalah*. He upholds that view that while certain concepts in *Chemdat Yamim* may sometimes resemble *Sabbatian* ideas, and even admits that “*there is no doubt that there are Sabbatian components*”²⁶⁷ within *Chemdat Yamim*, nevertheless, an *essential* linkage to *Sabbatianism* is tenuous. He also acknowledges that “*the*

Yehonatan Eibeschuetz. In both cases, it was R. Yakov Emden who is regarded as being responsible for awakening the alleged *Sabbatian* nature of *Chemdat Yamim*.

²⁶⁶ *Chemdat Yamim* was published six times during the eighteenth century: Izmir (1731-1732), Kushta (1735-1737), Zolkiew (1742-1746), Zolkiew (1753-1763), Livorno (1759-1764), and Venice (1763).

²⁶⁷ Translation is mine.

author made use of sections...that originated within Sabbatian study houses."²⁶⁸

Furthermore, in keeping with his defensive position, Fogel (2015:366) suggests that the 'Redemption' which the author draws much attention to, is not a collective or *messianic* redemption but rather a *personal* one, between the individual and God.²⁶⁹ Fogel insists that the author did not intend to introduce any antinomian practices and, instead, considered *Chemdat Yamim* to be in accordance with the *Halachic Mesora*, legal ritual, and tradition.

In what may be considered an early rejoinder to the allegations of *Sabbatian* underpinnings plaguing *Chemdat Yamim*, the nineteenth-century Jerusalem *Kabbalist*, R. Menachem Menchin Halperin defends the legitimacy of the work. Some of his points include the following observations:

- 1) Many prominent rabbis gave their *Haskamot* (Approbations) to *Chemdat Yamim* and at least twenty other *sefarim* (holy books) included excerpts from it.
- 2) The "incriminating" *gematriot* (numerologies) are not unique to *Chemdat Yamim* and are also to be found in the earlier (non-Sabbatian) *Lurianic Kabbalah* as well as the *Zohar*.
- 3) To counter the claim that R. Natan of Gaza authored the work, a certain Shlomo haLevi is mentioned in *Chemdat Yamim* together with honorifics indicating he was still alive. He passed away in 1635, which was eight years before R. Natan of Gaza was born.
- 4) The prayer for the wellbeing of *Mashiach ben Yosef* does not mesh with R. Natan of Gaza's view that that particular Messiah had already come.
- 5) The reference to the *Lurianic* devotions also does not coincide with R. Natan of Gaza who believed those *Lurianic* techniques were no longer applicable (see section 2.2.2).

²⁶⁸ Translation is mine.

²⁶⁹ Yaari (1963:97), however, maintains that that the overarching purpose of *Chemdat Yamim* was to promote a messianic (and not a personal) redemption, and "increase yearnings for the imminent Redemption and to hasten the Redemption through good deeds." Translation is mine.

6) The acronyms relating to “*Natan*” refer to another person, Natan ben Elisha Ashkenazi.²⁷⁰

To this day, the authorship of *Chemdat Yamim* remains unresolved and there is even a view that it may have been the result of multiple authors (Fogel 2025:367). It could be said that *Chemdat Yamim* is one of the most controversial Jewish books ever. In more recent times, Iraqi-born R. Ovadia Yosef, the *Sefaradi* Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel from 1973 to 1983, gave his approbation to a new edition of *Chemdat Yamim* and referred to the work as a *sefer kadosh* (holy book). The Turkish Chief Rabbi of Izmir, R. Chaim Falaji (1788-1868) was, similarly, its ardent defender, saying that no one can experience the holiness of *Shabbat* unless they read *Chemdat Yamim*. R. Chaim Yosef David, known as the Chida (1724-1806) also supported the work,²⁷¹ even though at the time it was still believed that R. Natan of Gaza had been its author (Fogel 2015:369).

The controversies surrounding *Chemdat Yamim* were not taken lightly. Disputes transcended theoretical speculations and sometimes lives were literally lost in the bitter conflicts over the work. According to R. Yakov Emden, R. Eleazar Rokeach, the *Ashkenazi* Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam (c.1685-1742) – who was one of the rabbis who had excommunicated R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto – lost his life²⁷² in Safed when he later emigrated there. R. Yakov Emden avers that the reason for his untimely death was that he opposed the study of *Chemdat Yamim*.²⁷³ In another related incident, a certain R. Wolf, a Lithuanian teacher who resided in Altona, was murdered as a punishment for his engaging with *Chemdat Yamim*.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ These points are taken from various sections of R. Menachem Menchin Halperin’s work, *Kevod Chachamim*, Frumkin, Jerusalem, 1896 (see Fogel 2015:376).

²⁷¹ Scholem (1948:42) points out that the Chida, although a supporter of *Chemdat Yamim*, did not mention the book by name in his *Shem haGedolim*.

²⁷² According to *Shivchei haBesht*, R. Eleazar Rokeach “willed himself to die” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:85).

²⁷³ Yakov Emden, *Shevirat Luchot haAvon*, Altona, 1756, 46. In R. Yakov Emden’s words: וממש נקצרו ימיו בעבור תחרות זה, “His life was shortened, truly, due to this rivalry.” On the other hand, Scholem, writing in his own handwriting in his copy of the work *Sefer Maaseh Rokeach* by R. Eleazar Rokeach, notes that the author made frequent use of *Sabbatian* quotations from *Sabbatian* works like *Or Yisrael* of R. Yisrael Yofeh (see section 3.1.11) and that he was an extreme messianist. Yaari similarly expresses reservations on R. Eleazar Rokeach’s alleged anti-*Sabbatianism* (Fogel 2015:375).

²⁷⁴ Yakov Emden, *Kitzur Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, Odesa, 1867, 104.

Many rabbis had consulted *Chemdat Yamim* but stopped short of mentioning its name. Ironically, for the most part, *Chemdat Yamim* was *not* adopted by the *Chassidim*,²⁷⁵ whereas it was embraced by the *Mitnagdim* including the Vilna Gaon and his students (Fogel 2015:369). The Lithuanian schools, including R. Moshe Schreiber (1762–1839) known as *Chatam Sofer*,²⁷⁶ and the flagship *Mussar (Ethical)* work by R. Alexander Ziskind of Horadna (d.1794), *Yesod veShoresh haAvodah*, refer to *Chemdat Yamim* in glowing terms.²⁷⁷

The reception of *Chemdat Yamim* in *Chassidic* circles is complicated and contradictory, and becomes even more so with regard to the Baal Shem Tov himself. The Baal Shem Tov is recorded in two stories in *Shivchei haBesht* (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:85-86) as being extremely opposed to *Chemdat Yamim*. According to *Shivchei haBesht*:

“[t]he author of this book [*Chemdat Yamim*] was a member of the sect of Shabbetai Tsevi...The style will be attractive and it will lure many people...[but] it will contaminate the world” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86).²⁷⁸

However, Fogel reminds us that the historiography of these sources in *Shivchei haBesht* is questionable. But he suggests that even if we do assume that the Baal Shem Tov rejected *Chemdat Yamim*, it is still not clear that it was precisely because of its *Sabbatian* content.²⁷⁹ It may simply be that since the general ethos of many of the Baal Shem Tov’s later teachings resembled aspects of *Chemdat Yamim*, the Baal Shem Tov possibly regarded the work as a threat, in that it challenged the originality of his teachings. He may have wanted to remove any possibility for allegations to be

²⁷⁵ There were significant exceptions to this rule. Some of the *Chassidim* who accepted *Chemdat Yamim* were students of the Baal Shem Tov, including R. Yisrael Charif (1696-1781), the *Magid of Kozhnitz* (1737-1814), and R. Aharon of Karlin (1736-1772), as well as R. Nachman of Kossov (d. 1746). [R. Nachman of Kossov supported R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz and was therefore suspected of *Sabbatianism* by R. Yakov Emden, who referred to him as “the *ignoramus of the Sabbatian sect*” (Yakov Emden, *Sefer Hitabkut*, 1862, 20b)]. On the other hand, among the students and followers of the Baal Shem Tov who opposed *Chemdat Yamim* were R. Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov (1783-1841), R. Tzvi Hirsh of Zidichov (1763-1831) and R. Yitzchak Isaac of Komarno (1806-1874) (Fogel 2015:369).

²⁷⁶ Moshe Schreiber, *Chatam Sofer al haTorah*, Jerusalem, 2006, *Vayera*, 83.

²⁷⁷ Alexander Ziskind of Horadna, *Yesod veShoresh haAvodah*, Jerusalem, 1940, 202.

²⁷⁸ Square brackets are mine.

²⁷⁹ If I understand Fogel correctly, although *Shivchei haBesht* mentions that *Chemdat Yamim* was indeed written by “a member of the sect of Shabbetai Tsevi” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86), the Baal Shem Tov may not have rejected the work for that reason.

levelled against him that *Chemdat Yamim* was an inspiration, if not a source, for his teachings (Fogel 2015:376). On the other hand, based on this line of thinking, one might adversely argue that the reason why *Shivchei haBesht* intentionally mentioned that *Chemdat Yamim* was written by “a member of the sect of Shabbetai Tsevi” – and then demonstrated that the work was rejected – was to create and show a concerted distancing from charges of alleged *Sabbatian* influences on the Baal Shem Tov.

David Kahana (1913:149-152) shows how widespread the reception of content from *Chemdat Yamim* was, particularly during the nineteenth century. These concepts were published and printed, often with the attributions omitted, and against the protestations of some of the rabbis. This means that when *Shivchei haBesht* was first printed by R. Yisrael Yofeh (a student of the first *Rebbe* of *Chabad Chassidim*, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi) in 1814, *Chemdat Yamim* would have already been a well-known work. With the allegations of *Sabbatianism* associated with *Chemdat Yamim*, it is no wonder that *Shivchei haBesht* may have needed to present a narrative emphasising the Baal Shem Tov’s hostility toward the work (see section 4.7.4). All this uncertainty makes it very difficult for this study to assess *Chemdat Yamim*’s direct influence on *Chassidism*.

Salomon Rosanes (1935:445) writes:

“One cannot deny that in many places [in *Chemdat Yamim*] there are traces of *Sabbatianism* and [even of] Natan of Gaza himself. On the other hand, it is not possible that most of matters [discussed in the book] emanated from this false prophet. Just like it is not possible that all the content [of *Chemdat Yamim*] emanated from a single author. The [final] author simply gathered material from wherever he was able to.”

Fogel (2015:385) similarly defends the essential non-*Sabbatian* status of *Chemdat Yamim* by his observation that:

“the widespread popularity of the book testifies to the fact that among large segments [of the population], it was not conceived of as being a *Sabbatian* work.”²⁸⁰

²⁸⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

I question this notion because *Sabbatianism*, by its very nature and as evident by the historical record, at one time engulfed, if not most Jews, then certainly close to that approximation. This study has demonstrated that even after the initial *Sabbatian* enthusiasm waned, large numbers of rabbinic *personalities* together with their associated *literary works*, continued to pervade and influence their circles of followers. In the case of *Chemdat Yamim*, despite its voluminous size,²⁸¹ it was printed eight times in thirty-three years, and often even smaller pamphlet-like sections were printed to meet the demand. Many of these pamphlets, which often served as liturgical guides, were then copied and re-copied. In some cases, a point was reached where there was no need to print further copies because the material had already been incorporated into the newer and official printed formats like *Machzorim* (*prayer books for the Holy days*). Yaari (1963:102) counted about fifty-five *Sefaradi Machzorim* that were published with new material from *Chemdat Yamim*. In other cases, some *Chassidim* in Eastern Europe adopted the suggested practices²⁸² from *Chemdat Yamim* as their own (Yaari 1963:97, 98, 102, 103). Yaari (1963:103) demonstrates that numerous societies, prefaced by the designation *Chevrat* (*The Society of...*) or *Yeshivat* (*The Yeshiva of...*) were established for the purpose of meeting regularly in order to study *Chemdat Yamim*. On auspicious occasions, including every Thursday night in some cases, they would stay awake all night to read from predetermined sections of *Chemdat Yamim*. They even had special pamphlets printed and named for these initiatives. The fact that *Chemdat Yamim* – clearly vacillating somewhere in a liminal space between *Sabbatianism* and rabbinic orthodoxy – was widely accepted by large numbers of people may serve as an *indictment* of its *Sabbatian* links; and not as Fogel (2015:385) suggests an authoritative *endorsing* of the work. The ethos of the book would certainly have resonated with many people. Even repentant *Sabbatians* would have recognised an approach to mysticism that they were familiar with.

Yaari (1964:152) shows that as a consequence of the publication of *Chemdat Yamim* and its widespread acceptance, the character of *Simchat Torah*,²⁸³ had

²⁸¹ The work first came out in three volumes and then later in four volumes.

²⁸² Examples of this would be the order of welcoming the *Ushpizim*, or *spiritual guests* who are said to visit the *Sukah* on the Festival *Sukot* (Tabernacles), and the order of the *Hakafot*, or *circling* of the synagogue on the Festival of *Simchat Torah* (following immediately after Tabernacles).

²⁸³ The celebration of the completion of the yearly cycle of the reading of the Torah in the synagogue.

irrevocably changed. The custom to dance and circle the *Bima* (*raised platform*) in the synagogue, owes its popular acceptance to *Chemdat Yamim*. This custom was widely adopted by the *Chassidim* and became a recognisable universal Jewish practice. It is another example of how *Chemdat Yamim* created institutions of Judaism that remain to this day. The widespread acceptance of this ritual was so powerful that it managed to displace much traditional opposition to dancing in the synagogue. This would be another concrete example of Fogel's point that *Chemdat Yamim's* near-universal acceptance mitigates the possibility that it was essentially of a *Sabbatian* nature.

But again, my argument is that *Chemdat Yamim's* alluring and appealing mystical message and innovative approach to practical Judaism, may indeed have struck a familiar chord in the minds and hearts of many of the people who had previously delved into *Sabbatian* mysticism.

On the other hand, Liebes (1995b:302 n.15) points out that although "*the Sabbatian nature of the book [Chemdat Yamim] has been proven*,"²⁸⁴ one would be hard-pressed to find overt *Sabbatian* references in the work even though it clearly includes some material directly from R. Natan of Gaza. This is because, according to Liebes (1995b:13) it was intentionally written in the style of *Lurianic Kabbalah* and even served as a conduit for its dissemination, whilst its *Sabbatian* provenance is not overtly discernible. If this is the case, then the *Sabbatian* content would be far more subtle and my argument that the people would have recognised familiar elements from previous *Sabbatianism* would be severely weakened.

The approaches of Rosanes, Fogel and others, however, indicate that blatant *Sabbatian* content sometimes appears in the work, but sidestep the matter by suggesting it was insignificant, unintentional or secondary.²⁸⁵ This frees the author(s) and the book from technically being classified as *Sabbatian* (Fogel 2015:378).

One of Fogel's arguments is his challenge to Scholem (1955:94) who maintains that the occurrence of the expression *melech beyofyo* (*the king in his splendour*) in *Chemdat Yamim*, is an allusion to Shabbatai Tzvi. *Chemdat Yamim* contains the following petition:

²⁸⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

²⁸⁵ Rosanes (1935:445) suggests that *Chemdat Yamim* was compiled over an extended period ranging between 1635 and 1720. As to the alluded references to R. Natan of Gaza, Rosanes maintains that he was never outlawed to the degree Shabbatai Tzvi was, and that many congregations continued to accept him because they regarded him as redeemable.

מלך ביופיו תחזינה עינינו וישמח לבבנו ותמלוך אתה הוא ה' אל-הנו מהרה ע"כ
מעשיך

"May our eyes behold the king in his splendour and our hearts will rejoice and may You God our Lord speedily rule over all your works"
(*Chemdat Yamim*, III, 1735: 4b).²⁸⁶

Fogel (2015:391) disputes Scholem's interpretation using this extract to show that *melech beyofyo* does not refer to Shabbatai Tzvi, but rather to God. I think, though, that one could also read this extract the other way –in support of Scholem – by inserting a pause after the word "*rejoice*." By so doing, the first half of the sentence reads as a desire to see the *king in his splendour* who is not God but the Messiah – followed by the second section which is a reference to God. Even the structure of the phrase, with the second section beginning with *ותמלוך אתה* (*and may You God...rule*), may lend itself easier to such a reading as it introduces God as a new subject, after dealing with *melech beyofyo* (*king in his splendour* – the Messiah), who is the subject of the first section.

Regarding Fogel's (2015:390) notion that the obvious *Sabbatian* references in *Chemdat Yamim* which he acknowledges were taken directly from *Sabbatian* study houses yet are not specifically meant to be *Sabbatian*, I argue, that from a *Hashkafic* (theological) perspective – particularly during the later periods of the *Sabbatian* movement – such a position would be highly irregular, considering the typically binary nature of rabbinic conceptualisation. Rabbinic ambivalence towards *Sabbatianism* five decades and more after Shabbatai Tzvi would have been most unlikely. Especially regarding such an important matter as consulting questionable sources tainted with not just allegations of *Sabbatianism*, but with admitted and evident *Sabbatian* material. As I argued earlier (see section 3.1.10.1), I cannot think of any other area in the *Halachic* world where rabbis would turn such a blind eye to something as inherently challenging as *Chemdat Yamim*, no matter how delicately or obliquely the questionable material ended up in the work. Even though I concur with the research by Maoz Kahana (2012: 614) that there were some individual forays into *Sabbatianism* by members of "*the rabbinic elite*" (see section 3.1.11), *Chemdat Yamin* was not intended for select *individuals* but for the *masses*. I suggest that by the time *Chemdat*

²⁸⁶ Translation is mine.

Yamim became popularised around the first quarter to mid-eighteenth century, *Sabbatianism*, although still a significant component within Jewish society, was no longer officially considered a theologically immune and respectable area for the mainstream to freely move in and out of.²⁸⁷

The initial rabbinic ambivalence towards the *Sabbatian* movement that had so characterised the early period, was no longer the official rabbinic position anymore. Using known writings of R. Natan of Gaza as found in *Chemdat Yamim*, and then ignoring or even endorsing them, is a very strange rabbinic stance, especially as Scholem (1973:719) shows that even after the apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi in 1666:

“[Nathan]²⁸⁸ was a particularly active apostle of the gradually evolving heretical theology of Sabbatianism.”

Scholem is referring to the period around 1668 and he is amazed that R. Natan of Gaza was ignored and left to be, and writes that “*the later neglect of Nathan remains an unsolved riddle.*” How much more surprising would rabbinic ambivalence be five decades later; and yet R. Natan of Gaza’s writings are included in *Chemdat Yamim*?

Fogel (2015:391), following Liebes, confirms that there is no overt *Sabbatian Kabbalah* nor *Sabbatian* messianism that calls out to the reader of *Chemdat Yamim*. He, therefore, asks: “*Where, then, is the expression of Sabbatianism in the book?*”²⁸⁹ He is correct on one level. But from an Orthodox rabbinic perspective, provenance matters. Even biblical material, for example, from a non-Orthodox source, would not be used in an Orthodox environment, although the wording would be identical. By the same token, it is difficult to imagine how liturgy and teachings from known *Sabbatian* houses of study would be acceptable to the Orthodox rabbinate, despite the neutral ‘*non-overtly Sabbatian*’ wording. Today, some *yeshivot* will not allow neutral Aramaic dictionaries to be used as aids to *Talmud* study because of the non-Orthodox

²⁸⁷ At least three *Halachic* works, however, did quote and reference *Chemdat Yamim* around the middle of the eighteenth century, and this fact would mitigate in favour of Fogel’s (2015:385) view. On the other hand, about 258 editions of guides were following the prayer rites of *Chemdat Yamim* (Yaari 1963:97-112). These guides and prayer books were often affiliated to the *Kabbalistic* tradition, most notably those produced in Thessalonica (Benayahu 1973:181), and this would support my notion that particularly the *Kabbalists* were reluctant to give up some of the residual mystical aspects of *Sabbatianism*.

²⁸⁸ Square brackets are mine.

²⁸⁹ Translation is mine.

provenance of such albeit benign material. Fogel (2015:391) does not seem to consider this rabbinic perspective a factor at all because he writes:

“...at the time of the emergence of Shabbatai Tzvi, new and important innovations were enacted in the area of Kabbalah, and out of these innovations, new customs and mystical intentions were decreed which enhance the religious experience while maintaining the spirit of the Mesora [tradition].”²⁹⁰

It seems doubtful to me that later rabbinic authorities, now wise to the rise of *Sabbatianism*, would have endorsed “*new customs and mystical intentions*” originally emerging out of Shabbatai Tzvi, even if they retained an outward resemblance to “*the spirit of the Mesora*” and even if they did “*enhance the religious experience*.”

Fogel (2015:395-6) brings R. Moshe Zacut’s meeting with R. Natan of Gaza in Venice, as an example of the ‘cross-over culture’ existing between *Sabbatian* and non-*Sabbatians*. After the meeting, R. Moshe Zacut declared how impressed he was by R. Natan of Gaza who, he acknowledged, knew more *Zohar* than him. Fogel writes: “*It is against a [harmonious]²⁹¹ background like this, that we must view Chemdat Yamim.*” We must remember, however, that this meeting took place as early as 1668. The reception of *Chemdat Yamim* was many decades later, when, as I suggest, the rabbis officially began to draw sharper lines in the sand between *Sabbatians* and non-*Sabbatians*.

Fogel continues to show that the author of *Chemdat Yamim* had an association with R. Moshe Zacut in keeping with his argument that non-*Sabbatians* often delved into *Sabbatianism* without any untoward consequences. The anonymous author of *Chemdat Yamim* writes:

“When I was in Venice, I sent a booklet...to my colleague in Torah...the Kabbalist Moshe Zacut...and the students of his yeshiva”
(*Chemdat Yamim*, I, 1735:103b).²⁹²

This ubiquitous ‘open source’ and ‘crossover culture’ was, in Fogel’s view, also the reason why *Chemdat Yamim* had no difficulty in:

²⁹⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

²⁹¹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

²⁹² Translation is mine.

“adopting ideas from Natan of Gaza without being incriminated as a supporter of Sabbatian ideology” (Fogel 2015:396).²⁹³

However, it is tenuous to portray R. Moshe Zacut as representative of the mainstream rabbinate considering that he was involved in the *Sabbatian* movement at one time (Sclar 2017:63). Additionally, two of the “*students in his yeshiva*” were R. Avraham Rovigo, who became an important leader of the *Sabbatian* movement; and R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale, who openly had a portrait of Shabbatai Tzvi in his home (see section 3.1.1). I suggest that the very acknowledgement of an association with “*the Kabbalist Moshe Zacut*,” may be more of an indication of a *Sabbatian* link to *Chemdat Yamim* than a mitigation thereof.

Benayahu (1973:269) maintains that *Sabbatian* ideas and customs had totally saturated the Jewish world at that time, making it nearly impossible to separate *Sabbatianism* from mainstream Judaism. He is of the view that most people would have simply gotten caught up in this wave of *Sabbatianism* without consciously being aware that it even was *Sabbatianism*. Benayahu (1959:145) acknowledges, however, that the anonymous author of *Chemdat Yamim* was indeed a “*Sabbatian author*,” but he only included a “*small number of Sabbatian fundamentals...which cannot corrupt or blemish [the reader]*.”²⁹⁴

I contend that many rabbis would have been fully aware of the *Sabbatian* content in *Chemdat Yamim*, and that either they endorsed it to some measure or they believed the material was somehow redeemable or rectifiable. While elements within society may have been unaware of the extent of the *Sabbatian* influences they were imbibing, I suspect that by that stage in the eighteenth century, certainly those within the rabbinic world who used the work, knew exactly where some of its teachings originated. A point had to have been reached where *Sabbatian* ideology in whatever form, substance or theological conceptualisation it was presented, could no longer enter the mainstream by accident.

From around the end of the twentieth century, we have witnessed that subsequent to a society being awakened to certain cultural and political anathemas, like gender inequality and racism, for example, it becomes hyper-sensitive in its choice of language and associations. It cautiously and consciously attempts to remove all

²⁹³ Translation is mine.

²⁹⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

questionable connotations that may seem to maintain links to its negative past. I would imagine that this would be the case, and even more so, regarding a religious society reeling from a mass incursion into a failed messianism. If any form of *Sabbatianism* was preserved in an Orthodox society close to the mid-eighteenth century, in any guise, it must have prevailed more by design than by default. Thus, *Chemdat Yamim*, in my estimation, may be yet another example of the subtle but ongoing phenomenon of *Sabbatian* influences on certain significant swathes of the rabbinic world despite the ‘authorised’ anti-*Sabbatian* doctrine and stance of the official Orthodox rabbinate.

Fogel (2015) makes well-structured and meticulous arguments to show that the general tenor of *Chemdat Yamim*, despite its adaptation of some *Sabbatian* material, is overwhelmingly mainstream.²⁹⁵ This is correct. But in my view, it is difficult to accept that the Orthodox rabbinate at that stage, having been aware of, and endured, decades of *Sabbatian* literature being clandestinely and intentionally incorporated into mainstream rabbinic literature, would permit even a few *Sabbatian* innuendos to slip through their hyper-vigilant traditional vetting systems – by accident. In a post-*Sabbatian* rabbinic mind, a hundred examples of mainstream Orthodox compliance in a book, cannot cancel and then simply ignore one example of *Sabbatian* non-compliance. This, particularly when it was known that many previous works were presented as mainstream products yet contained just sufficient *Sabbatian* allusions to resonate with a keen reader. In any case, it would have been in the pragmatic and material interests of a *Sabbatian* author to *limit*, rather than openly *expand* upon *Sabbatian* material, if the book was intended to successfully penetrate the mainstream market.

The author of *Chemdat Yamim* took pains to emphasise that the messianic era was in a distant and uncertain future and not in the immediate past. Fogel (2015:404-5) explains that the author goes so far as to suggest that the future redemption is “a cosmic redemption that does not [even]²⁹⁶ require the absolute manifestation of a personal Messiah.”²⁹⁷ Fogel uses this conceptualisation as support for his notion that

²⁹⁵ An example of this attempt at ‘mainstreaming’ is *Chemdat Yamim*’s emphasis on the prohibition of *Cheilev* (*forbidden fat*), which was something that Shabbatai Tzvi had *permitted*.

²⁹⁶ Square brackets are mine for emphasis.

²⁹⁷ Translation is mine. This is an unusual and remarkable mystical view and counterintuitively seems to resemble the Maimonidean rationalist position (Michal 2022a:145).

the author of *Chemdat Yamim* could not have been a *Sabbatian*, because *Sabbatians* believed that the Messiah or at least the Messianic Age had already arrived.

I suggest, however, that if the author had *Sabbatian* inclinations, he certainly would have gone out of his way to hide them. By emphasising the remoteness of practical and applied messianism – something that would have been extremely uncommon and unlikely for a non-rationalist rabbi and mystic to espouse in the first instance – he would have been protecting himself from accusations of *Sabbatian* messianism, while still engaging safely in the risky topic of messianism.

In any case, even at that time, I think any author could have still gotten away with maintaining a basic theological connection to the traditional notion of the *Geula haKerova* (*Imminent Redemption*) as it is commonly referred to, and no undue suspicions would have been raised. The author, in another section, comfortably uses the expression “*speedily in our days*” when referring to the rebuilding of the Temple (*Chemdat Yamim*, vol. 2, 17b). The fact that there is an emphasis on a very unusual ‘distant redemption’ may be the result of intentional hypervigilance.

Fogel (2015:407), while acknowledging the unmistakable and ever-present messianic motifs throughout *Chemdat Yamim*, writes:

“Notwithstanding [the constant allusions to messianism], we can conclude that the messianic redemption is not presented by the author as a practical reality within reach, but rather as vague and distant dream.”²⁹⁸

Why would the author of *Chemdat Yamim* dwell so much on messianic ideas that were essentially out of reach? Why would he emphasise messianism in a work intended for the masses – while suggesting that they would probably never experience messianism as a reality nor be led by a personal and human Messiah? The reiteration of *common* and *basic* messianic themes seems oddly out of place for the anonymous author who simultaneously claims to espouse an uncommon model of a *delayed* and *cosmic* redemption.

Fogel (2015:411) maintains that there were two components held in tension by the author of *Chemdat Yamim*. One was “*a respect for the tradition of yearning for a[n*

²⁹⁸ Translation and square brackets are mine.

imminent]²⁹⁹ *Messiah*” contrasted against “a vision of the messianic era as an unrealistic and distant dream or hope.”³⁰⁰ I find this differentiation hard to reconcile with an author who was clearly a mystic, who viewed the space between earth and heaven to be densely populated with opposing spiritual energies, and the space in heaven even more so,³⁰¹ and who was so pedantic in the minute observances of Jewish tradition³⁰² - to adopt such a radical antithetical notion of a non-personal and vaguely distant, impractical and unrealistic Messianic era, which is more in line with rationalist Jewish thinking. I would even venture to say that denying the realism of an imminent and personal Messiah would be close to heresy, especially in mystical circles.

Fogel (2015:408) does show how the author places a premium on *individual* redemption (as in the conceptualisation of being saved from *Gehinom* and spared from an uncomfortable reincarnation) over the *collective* messianic redemption at the end of days. This is why, Fogel maintains, the collective messianic redemption receives a more theoretical and secondary position over the immediacy and urgency of the individual redemption in the afterlife. Hence there is nothing untoward about the author’s unusual and almost dismissive treatment of collective messianism.

Fogel is certainly correct in his observation that there is a focus on individual redemption. The question, though, is why the author needs to part so dramatically from the traditional depiction of the messianic redemption. Granted, the focus of the book may be more on *individual redemption*, but why should this not be able to co-exist and be compatible with the traditional rabbinic yearning for a speedy *collective redemption* as well? I argue, therefore, that the unusual formulation of a vague and distant messianic era may have been intentional in order to free the author from allegations of *Sabbatianism*, like so many other writers of that period.

Fogel (2015:411) concludes by stating that in the anonymous author’s conceptualisation of religion, the ultimate purpose besides *individual redemption*, is:

²⁹⁹ Square brackets are mine, as this is the traditional belief.

³⁰⁰ Translation is mine.

³⁰¹ *Chemdat Yamim*, vol. 4, 80b.

³⁰² *Chemdat Yamim* also contains legal ritual rulings known as *Piskei Halacha* (Fogel 2015:411).

“...the fixing of the universe [Tikun Olam] through the powerful agency of holy energies, and the nullification of the impure energies [Kelipot and Chitzonim].”³⁰³

Fogel makes no mention of the Messiah or messianism as an ultimate feature of the book. Fogel thus eliminates the central role and function of the Messiah and the messianic era in his summary of the author’s set of beliefs, something I consider to be most unlikely. Even scholars like Scholem (1941a:329), who rule out the pivotal preoccupation with messianism in the belief systems of the early *Chassidim* (see section 2.5.3) would not go so far as to eliminate its function so radically and so entirely.

Fogel (2015:397) and Benayahu (1959:143) emphasise how R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai, known as *Chida*, well-knew of the *Sabbatian* content in *Chemdat Yamim*, yet still endorsed the work and even made use of its prayers. The *Chida* “understood that there were valuable teachings which one could adopt despite their *Sabbatian origins*,”³⁰⁴ and he also openly admired, and quoted from, R. Shmuel Primo, the scribe of Shabbatai Tzvi. *Chida* lived between 1724 and 1806, which is exactly the period where one would have expected an Orthodox rabbinic opposition to any *Sabbatian* content; yet Fogel uses *Chida* as support for the acceptance of *Chemdat Yamim* at that time despite its “*Sabbatian origins*.” The *Sabbatianism* of *Chemdat Yamim* is not considered all that relevant or noteworthy.

Exemplars like *Chida* and others, I maintain, only serve to bolster my hypothesis that *Sabbatian* influences continued to significantly saturate the rabbinic mainstream, even when they were thought to have dissipated and outlawed. This supports my contention that these rabbis knew exactly where these ideas originated; and they either wanted to ‘neutralise,’ ‘elevate’³⁰⁵ or perhaps partly adopt and thereby perpetuate certain aspects of *Sabbatian* ideology. However one chooses to frame or define the parameters of the rabbinic relationship to *Sabbatianism*, *Sabbatian*

³⁰³ Translation and square brackets are mine.

³⁰⁴ Translation is mine.

³⁰⁵ R. Yehuda Moshe Patiah of Baghdad (1859-1942) – famous for the alleged efficacy of his amulets and knowledge of reincarnation and such related matters – believed he could affect a *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) for the soul of R. Nathan of Gaza, as did R. Tzvi Hirsh of Zidichov (1763-1831)(Yaari 1954:153-150, 138).

influences must be regarded as a major contributing component of eighteenth-century Judaism, worthy of serious consideration.

Ultimately, even Fogel (2015:413) is not entirely unyielding in his view that *Chemdat Yamim* is not the product of a *Sabbatian*. He admits that:

“there is some doubt as to whether the author of *Chemdat Yamim* was anticipating the return of Shabbatai Tzvi...there is some doubt as to whether one can consider the work to be that of a *Sabbatian*...If one must characterise the work as *Sabbatian*, it would be more accurate to define it as a work that emerged in the aftermath of Sabbatianism and it was the spirit of the times that shaped its tenor.”³⁰⁶

4.6.1 Synthesis

It is significant that even after a robust and well-structured defence of *Chemdat Yamim* extending to almost sixty pages of argument, Fogel (2015:413) acknowledges that it is not possible to free the work from the taint of the *Sabbatian* “*spirit of the times*.” Liebes (2003:16, footnote 105) describes Fogel’s defence of *Chemdat Yamim* as an “*attempt of a lawyer to protect his client*” and “*not the approach of a historian*.”

While the authorship and purpose of *Chemdat Yamim* have not yet been incontrovertibly determined, both correspond closely to this study’s *literature and personalities approach*. I maintain that *Chemdat Yamim* is another example of the Jewish religious world’s saturation with this style of *literature* produced by rabbinic *personalities*, in the aftermath of Shabbatai Tzvi, who remained, to varying degrees, under some influence of the *Sabbatian* storm.

Fogel (2015:413) also confirms that the undisputed *Sabbatian* content within *Chemdat Yamim* is not an isolated incident but is very much:

“commensurate with the many other Jewish works produced at that time, including Prayer Books and Machzorim that were in common use.”³⁰⁷

This categorisation is consistent with the findings of this study. Having given voice to, yet challenged, efforts at neutralising and reframing the underlying *Sabbatian* tenor of

³⁰⁶ Translation is mine.

³⁰⁷ Translation is mine.

Chemdat Yamim, we now turn to an indisputable *Sabbatian* work, *Sefer haTzoref*, compiled by R. Heshil Tzoref (1633-c.1700).

4.7 R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref and his *Sefer haTzoref*

In this section, I shall try to demonstrate how R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref and his *Sefer haTzoref* served as major and overt links connecting *Sabbatianism* to *Chassidism*. R. Heshil Tzoref was born in Vilna in 1633 and passed away in Cracow in 1700 or 1720 (Rabinowitsch 1939:126). He had no significant religious education and made a living as a silversmith ('tzoref' is the Hebrew for 'silversmith'). During the series of wars between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Sweden, he sought refuge in Amsterdam, where he was exposed to the ideas of Shabbatai Tzvi. When he returned to Vilna in 1666, he became "*the most important personality of the Sabbatian movement in Lithuania*" (Maciejko 2010b:n.p.).³⁰⁸ Put more directly, R. Heshil Tzoref:

"became the outstanding spokesman of the believers in Shabbetai Zevi and persisted in this belief throughout his life" (Scholem 2007a:670).

Rabinowitsch (1939:126) shows how R. Heshil Tzoref was praised in the *Pinkas* (*Communal Records*) of Cracow where he is referred to as "*the great Tamarisk and Kabbalist*."³⁰⁹ The entry reads:

"From the days of [the biblical] Yehoshua [Joshua] until Yehoshua [Heshil Tzoref] there has never been anyone like him...he never moved from his house except to go to synagogue...and literally wrote day and night without sleep...may the redemption come soon. Amen."³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ R. Heshil Tzoref's return from Amsterdam to Vilna is most significant to this study because it underscores the often-overlooked phenomenon of *Sabbatianism* influencing Vilna which is generally considered to have been the bastion of Lithuanian opposition to the *Chassidic* movement and free of any taint of *Sabbatianism*. It was the Lithuanian *Mitnagdim* who, after all, had accused the *Chassidim* of their *Sabbatian* associations. R. Heshil Tzoref's influence of Lithuanian *Mitnagdim* is not widely known and is an important research component of this investigation (see section 6.1).

³⁰⁹ The *Pinkas* makes no reference to any relationship with *Sabbatianism* and simply describes him as a mainstream *Kabbalist*.

³¹⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

R. Heshil Tzoref was greatly influenced by the teachings of R. Natan Nata ben Shlomo Spira of Cracow (1585-1633), author of the *Sefer Megaleh Amukot*, who had passed away in the same year that R. Heshil Tzoref was born. R. Heshil Tzoref saw himself as the next to carry the messianic baton. R. Natan Nata Spira's name is often associated with an aggressive approach to messianism.³¹¹ He was "*intoxicated*" with numbers and numerology (Scholem 2007b:119). He played an important role in the dissemination of previous *Kabbalistic* and *Lurianic* material, and was most concerned with gathering the "*holy sparks scattered among gentiles in order to bring redemption nearer*" (Elior 2010:n.p.).

"Spira drew a great deal from Christianity and even revived various elements of the Jewish-Christian tradition that are found in midrashic literature" (Elior 2010:n.p.).

However, R. Natan Nata Spira did not engage with Christianity to foster inter-religious dialogue but rather to confront it. He wanted to use common mystical features in both Judaism and Christianity to 'nullify' the latter. He believed he could do so because in his conceptualisation Christianity was "*a satanic version of the true faith,*" and "*similarities between the religions actually make possible the battle against Christianity and its 'nullification'*" (Elior 2010:n.p.). This theologically aggressive, vengeful and war-like approach was later mirrored by R. Heshil Tzoref (Liebes 2007:6) (see section 2.5.1.1). These confrontational theologies were considered necessary for the envisioned program of imminent messianic redemption, and they highlight:

"the complexity of the connection between the Jewish and Christian worlds in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Elior 2010:n.p.).

R. Heshil Tzoref also created controversy within the rabbinic establishment. He was opposed to rabbis earning money for their Torah study and had particularly harsh words to say about those rabbis who received salaries. His language was so sharp that when R. Yakov Segel once repeated what R. Heshil Tzoref (whom he referred to

³¹¹ A question worthy of further exploration is whether the *Sabbatian* 'warlike' or 'active' model of the Messiah – which was a break from the earlier 'passive' *Lurianic* Messiah (see section 2.2.5) – was taken from R. Natan Nata Spira in the first place? In other words, it may be more chronologically correct to say that R. Natan Nata (instead of the *Sabbatians*) had made the break with the 'passive' *Lurianic* model, although he certainly did serve to disseminate the other general teachings *Lurianic Kabbala*. The *Sabbatians* may then have taken their 'active' Messiah from R. Natan Nata Spira.

as “*the Kabbalist*”) had said to another respected rabbi who did receive a salary, he (Segel) was severely criticised for repeating it. R. Yakov Segal remarked that he wished he had rather withheld R. Heshil Tzoref’s sharp words and not repeated them. R. Yakov Segal was never prepared to commit R. Heshil Tzoref’s controversial words to writing, and he commented “*it was for the best that I kept quiet*” (Scholem 1941b:45). This indicates that R. Heshil Tzoref would have been well-known, in Christian and Jewish circles, if just for his radical and controversial views.

Unlike other *Sabbatian* leaders who excelled in *doctrinal* ideology, R. Heshil Tzoref’s main appeal lay in his *charismatic* attributes, his novel combinations of Hebrew letters, numerology as well as his claims to prophecy (see section 2.5.1.1). He soon attracted a large group of followers for whom he acted as an oracle; and Scholem (2007a:670) describes him as a prefigure of later *Chassidic Rebbes* as “[s]tories told about him already have a noticeably ‘hasidic’ flavor.” His followers thronged to him, not just from Vilna but from all corners of Poland. He even took care of their personal needs and they believed he could save them from evil decrees as well as provide a *Tikun* (*spiritual remedy*) for their souls.

Although often described as having “*little formal education*” (Maciejko 2010b:n.p.), he maintained “*intense connections with the Sabbatian leadership of his time, including [the Sabbatian ideologue] Avraham Michael [Miguel] Cordozo*” (Scholem 1941b:41).³¹² R. Heshil Tzoref was also connected to the *Sabbatian* network of R. Avraham Rovigo in Italy (see section 3.1.5) with whom he corresponded. There is also evidence of his correspondence with R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale one of the teachers of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (see section 3.1.10). Both R. Avraham Rovigo and R. Binyamin haCohen Vitale regarded R. Heshil Tzoref as a leader of the *Sabbatian* movement and consulted him on all matters (Liebes 2007:1).

After Shabbatai Tzvi’s passing in 1676, R. Heshil Tzoref announced himself as *Mashiach ben Yosef* who was to be the pre-cursor to Shabbatai Tzvi’s perceived second coming. A year before he passed away, R. Heshil Tzoref joined the *Chavurah Kedosha*³¹³ of R. Yehuda Chasid, but did not join the latter’s *Sabbatian Aliya* (see section 3.1.3). Instead, he moved to Cracow where he married the daughter of Yakov

³¹² The common perception was that R. Heshil Tzoref acquired his knowledge from ‘above,’ the claim being that it was through the agency of a *Magid* (*angelic being*) and not a human teacher (Scholem 1941b:41).

³¹³ See footnote 245.

Fischhof (a probable second marriage), who was a member of R. Yehuda Chasid's *Sabbatian* group (Maciejko 2010b:n.p.).

Reinforcing the claimed affiliation of R. Heshil Tzoref to the *Sabbatian* group of R. Yehuda Chasid, is the fact that the first known reference, or excerpt of R. Heshil Tzoref's teachings, published immediately after his passing, is found in a work³¹⁴ by R. Moshe ben Yeshaya Katz, another member of the group of R. Yehuda Chasid. There, R. Moshe Katz quotes from a talk he heard:

“from a man of God, the Kabbalist, Moreinu heChasid vехаRav [our Teacher, the Chassid and Rabbi], R. Heshil Tzoref, of blessed memory from Vilna...[after which he concludes:] up to this point are the words of the charismatic [chein] wise man whose lips speak from the grave” (R. Moshe Katz, *Brit Mateh Moshe*, 1701:80b).³¹⁵

Another corroboration of R. Heshil Tzoref's *Sabbatian* associations is to be found in the writings of the *Sabbatian* doctor, Moshe Borga of Prague. When he was visiting R. Avraham Rovigo in Modena (see section 3.1.1), he heard “*matters concerning the redemption as is known to us*” that corresponded perfectly to what he had heard from R. Heshil Tzoref (Rabinowitsch 1939:126).

There is testimony by R. Chaim ben Shlomo of Kalis and R. Moshe ben Yitzchak of Vilna, that in 1666 R. Heshil Tzoref had declared that:

ואמר שזאת היא התורה החדשה שנתגלה בעת המשיח...ואמר שאמיר"ה הוא ולא
אחר...גם היה אומר שאין לעשות תיקון חצות כי השכינה במעלה עליונה ממה
שהיתה מקדם...וכן על כמה תפילות ופזמונים...ושעתה בעונות מתפללים ואינם
יודעים למי מתפללים...ואמר שכל עוד שלא ילמד בדרכים שלו מעבב המשיח

³¹⁴ A commentary on the Passover *Hagada* entitled *Brit Mateh Moshe*.

³¹⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine. A confirmation of R. Moshe Katz's *Sabbatian* affiliation is his reference in the Introduction to his commentary on the *Hagada* (*Brit Mateh Moshe*), where he mentions his intention to join the *Sabbatian Aliya* of R. Yehuda Chasid, but due to circumstances, his plans were thwarted. R. Moshe Katz's work was highly regarded and was the first *Hagada* to be printed in Berlin (Online source: <https://www.kedem-auctions.com/he/node/78962>. Retrieved on 30 October 2023). The *Hagada* was reprinted as recently as 1979, as a work by a “*Holy Kabbalist*” without any indication of its *Sabbatian* provenance. (Online source: <https://www.ebay.com/itm/373151417054>. Retrieved on 30 October 2023). This is another indication of how, centuries later, *Sabbatian* affiliated material is still able to pass as normative *Kabbalistic* literature.

“His [i.e., R. Heshil Tzoref’s] teachings were the ‘New Torah’ that was meant to be revealed in the times of the Messiah...and Amirah³¹⁶ was he [the Messiah] and no other [would be the Messiah]...and that we need no longer perform the Midnight Tikun³¹⁷ because the Shechina is now higher than it was in previous times...and he suggested other changes to the prayers...and he said that now, due to our sins, when we pray, we no longer know who to pray to³¹⁸...and he said that all who do not study his teachings, delay the Messiah...” (Rabinowitsch 1939:127).³¹⁹

All these overt associations serve to underpin R. Heshil Tzoref’s *Sabbatian* allegiances. These connections and connotations, together with his expansive and influential work *Sefer haTzoref*, fit well with this study’s methodology of examining *literature and personalities* to demonstrate a causal link between *Sabbatianism*, and *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism*.

4.7.1 *Sefer haTzoref*

Sefer haTzoref, authored by R. Heshil Tzoref, is perhaps one of the most enigmatic and elusive of the *Sabbatian* works – not only for its content but also because of later attempts at hiding all traces of this work. Parts of this work survive – about three hundred pages in the author’s handwriting – and are held at the National Library of Israel.³²⁰ However, the other sections appear to have been hidden away, which only adds to the intrigue as to the possible reasons why they were made unavailable.

This work is important for our study especially since the Baal Shem Tov reportedly had a manuscript of *Sefer haTzoref* and “ordered it to be copied by his disciple Shabetai of Raszków” (Maciejko 2010b:n.p.). According to Scholem (2007a:671), “this order was executed only more than 20 years after his [i.e., the Baal Shem Tov’s] death.”³²¹ Liebes traces a trajectory of the early transmission of *Sefer*

³¹⁶ Amirah is an acronym for: *Adoneinu Malkeinu Yarum Hodo* = Our Master and King, may he be exulted = Shabbatai Tzvi.

³¹⁷ The *Midnight Tikun* or *Tikun Chatzot*, is a midnight lamentation remembering the destruction of the Temple.

³¹⁸ See section 2.2.7 for a discussion of the *Sabbatian* notion of a division in the Godhead.

³¹⁹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

³²⁰ Ms. Heb. 38°465.

³²¹ Square brackets are mine.

haTzoref. According to Liebes (2007:16-20), the Baal Shem Tov had the autograph³²² of *Sefer haTzoref*, indicating, possibly, that he regarded the work to be of primary importance. This autograph was eventually copied, not by R. Shabbatai of Rashkov, but by R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz. It then remained in the archives of his teacher, R. Yeshaya haLevi of Dinowitz. From that copy, another copy was made by R. Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl. He then passed his copy on to his son, R. Mordechai who, in turn, divided the book into three sections, giving one section to each of his three sons. Each of the three sons made copies and they transferred their copies to R. Aharon of Karlin to make further copies. These were all early *Chassidic Rebbes*. A copy of *Sefer haTzoref* was also found in the possession of the *Kabbalist* R. Natan ben Levi from the Klaus in Brody, who hid them (Scholem 2007a:671).

Later, however, when *Chassidic Rebbe*, R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev wanted to publish *Sefer haTzoref*, R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot prevented him from doing so because he “recognised its Sabbatian character.”³²³ Scholem (1941b:41-2) supports the general accuracy of this event although he maintains that some embellishments may have been added. The basic story, however, is corroborated by other sources, one of them being an account in a letter written by R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot’s grandson, namely, R. Tzvi Hirsch haLevi Horowitz from Brody:

“[My grandfather, R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot] argued with the holy Gaon [R. Levi Yitzchak] of Berdichev...about manuscripts of [Sefer ha] Tzoref...and the printing thereof. But...R. Margoliot prevented them from being published because he said a foreign hand had dominated them [the writings] and he was able to prove this with a number of clear examples” (Scholem 1941b:42).³²⁴

Although Scholem authenticates this event, he still steadfastly holds that:

“the Baal Shem Tov and his great students, and his student's students did not know of the [Sabbatian] character of the ‘holy writings’ that came into their possession” (Scholem 1941b:42).³²⁵

³²² An autograph, as a document, refers to the original version of a manuscript written by the author and not a copy thereof.

³²³ See section 4.7.2 for Joseph Perl’s version of the events.

³²⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

³²⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Maciejko (Maciejko 2010b:n.p.) similarly maintains that although copies of *Sefer haTzoref* were circulated “in the courts of several *tsadikim*” (i.e., *Chassidic Rebbes*), nevertheless, they were “completely unaware of its Sabbatian nature.” Liebes, on the other hand, considers the *Sabbatian* nature of the work to have been quite evident:

“[*Sefer haTzoref*] had an important influence upon future generations. In this book, which is also the personal diary of the author, [information on] the Sabbatian world is combined with intimate secrets of R. Heshil, who is also the hero of the book, second [only] to Shabbatai Tzvi” (Liebes 2007:4).³²⁶

For a period of at least twenty-nine years – from 1666 to 1695 – R. Heshil Tzoref was occupied with writing his *Sefer haTzoref*. It was a lengthy book, divided into five sections corresponding to the five sections of the Pentateuch – and comprised many thousands of pages. There is testimony in the *Pinkas* (*community records*) of Cracow, that the fifth section of *Sefer haTzoref*, alone, contained “a thousand and a few hundred pages” (Rabinowitsch 1939:126).³²⁷

In 1937, seven hundred sheets (comprising 1400 pages) of *Sefer haTzoref* were discovered in a *Geniza* in Stolin (in present-day Belarus) belonging to the *Stoliner Chassidim*, by David Bachlinsky, a researcher who worked for Dr. Zev Rabinowitsch. Bachlinsky copied parts of this work. Later, Rabinowitsch wrote to one of the *Stoliner* rabbis³²⁸ asking for permission to publish the entire collection of *Sefer haTzoref* but received no response to his request (Melamed 2012:n.p.). Unfortunately, the manuscript was soon lost together with its owners who perished in the Holocaust (Liebes 2007:16). Thus, ironically, *Sefer haTzoref*, along with a vast collection of other works, were discovered just before they disappeared.

Melamed notes that if the lost collection of books from the *Stolin Geniza* were to be recovered even to some small degree “it would be one of the greatest *Hebraica finds of our time*.” Melamed continues:

“There is good reason to believe...that the collection of literary treasures...still exists somewhere...There are members of the community who still scour Judaica libraries and the black and grey

³²⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine.

³²⁷ Translation is mine.

³²⁸ R. Asher, the brother of the *Stoliner Rebbe*.

markets of Hebraica for further signs of its survival” (Melamed 2007:n.p.).

Liebes narrows the search grid for the ‘missing’ *Sefer haTzoref* somewhat:

“Most of this huge corpus [of *Sefer haTzoref*], which R. Heshil dedicated to the teachings of Melech haMashiach [King Messiah], is not to be found in the hands of researchers (although it still exists in courts of the Chassidim)” (Liebes 2007:4).³²⁹

Thus, according to Liebes, the *Sefer haTzoref* continues to exist although its location remains restricted knowledge. Considering that the work had passed through so many important and primary *Chassidic* hands, I don’t believe that the followers would have allowed it to have just disappeared, no matter the circumstances. It seems likely that once interest in the work was expressed by outsiders, it was intentionally hidden away because the owners knew exactly what evidence the researchers were looking for – a conclusive *Sabbatian* connection.

4.7.2 *Sefer haTzoref* in the account of Joseph Perl

The prominent *Maskil* (member of the Jewish *Enlightenment* movement) Joseph Perl (1773-1839) records how R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot of Brody – while still a young man – was presented with a volume of *Sefer haTzoref* by Mordechai Wagmeister. The names and details of Perl’s account are important because they show how many prominent rabbis had come into contact with *Sefer haTzoref*. The work was benignly referred to as a “*sefer Kabbalah*” (a *book of Kabbalah*) which reinforces the notion that *Sabbatianism* and general Jewish mysticism were often indistinguishable from one another. R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot laboured to understand the book but to no avail. Eventually, he discovered that the author of *Sefer haTzoref* was “*from the sect of Shabbatai Tzvi*.” R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot became angry and cast the book into the chamber pot. The others in the study house were shocked by his actions, so he retrieved the book and showed them what was written in it – including “*allusions to*

³²⁹ Translation and square brackets are mine. Round brackets are Liebes’.

Shabbatai Tzvi” – and after seeing the evidence, “*their anger subsided*” (Rabinowitsch 1941:80-81).³³⁰

Perl continues to write that soon thereafter, a visitor from Berdichev arrived in Brody with another volume of *Sefer haTzoref*. The visitor praised the book and explained that while he was still in Berdichev, R. Yehoshua, a judge and expert scribe from Dinowitz, had arrived in Berdichev and had said the following to the renowned *Chassidic* leader R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1804):³³¹

“This book [*Sefer haTzoref*] I [R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz] copied by hand from the [original] handwritten manuscript in the possession of the Baal Shem Tov...and the Baal Shem Tov would frequently say about it [i.e., about *Sefer haTzoref*] that: שעל ידו יוכל לבנות עולמות [through it worlds can be constructed]” (Rabinowitsch 1941:81).³³²

R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz told R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev that he was selling this volume of *Sefer haTzoref* because he needed money to marry off his daughter. It might be argued that this last detail seems to bring into question the reliability of this entire source as well as its attempt at linking the Baal Shem Tov to *Sefer haTzoref*. R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz may have ‘added’ his reference to the Baal Shem Tov owning that very manuscript to enhance his chances of a successful sale. Scholem (1941b:43), however, is convinced of the accuracy of this account because, the Baal Shem Tov considered the “*writings to be very important in his eyes*” – even, in Scholem’s view – as he was unaware of their *Sabbatian* origins (see below).

³³⁰ Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl’s notes on *Sefer haTzoref*. These notes were found by Dr Simcha Katz in Tarnopol (or Ternopil after 1944) in Ukraine, and sent to Rabinowitsch for publication, just two weeks before Katz’s passing. For the actual leaf in the handwriting of Perl, see online source: <https://www.kedem-auctions.com/en/content/handwritten-document-about-sefer-hazoref-and-rabbi-ephraim-zalman-margolioth-document#&gid=1&pid=1>. Retrieved on 23 August 2023. Rabinowitsch (1941a:83) reminds his readers that this document from Perl is not to be regarded as a primary source since it may have had its origins in previous oral traditions that were later put into writing by Perl. Joseph Perl is also the author of the anti-*Chassidic* satire and parody, *Megaleh Temirin (Revealer of Secrets)* which ridicules the new *Chassidic* movement and its venerated leaders. This indicates that Perl may have been somewhat tendentious in his ‘historical’ writings.

³³¹ Perl refers to R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev as R. *Yitzchak Levi* and to R. Heshil Tzoref as R. *Hirsch Tzoref*. He also refers to *Chassidim* as *Beshtnim*, although the term *Chassidim* was widely used since 1772 (Rabinowitsch 1941:84).

³³² Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl’s newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

From a different perspective, there may also be some truth in R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz's claim that the work was known to the Baal Shem Tov because R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot looked into the volume of *Sefer haTzoref* that the visitor had brought from Berdichev to Brody and he was shocked. It contained a verbatim account of teachings he had read in the *Likutei Amarim* authored by R. Dovber, the *Magid of Mezeritch*, the successor to the Baal Shem Tov.³³³ R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot then found a copy of *Likutei Amarim* and confirmed that it corresponded exactly to *Sefer haTzoref*:

"In fact, all the lessons in [the *Magid of Mezeritch's*] *Likutei Amarim* were copied from *Sefer haTzoref*, word for word" (Rabinowitsch 1941:82).³³⁴

Joseph Perl notes that R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot hid this critical observation out of fear of retaliation by the *Chassidim*. If Perl's account is accurate, this would be definitive proof that *Sefer haTzoref* not only influenced *Chasidism* but became one of its foundational texts. Liebes (2007:15-16), however, rejects this representation by Perl and calls it the "*libel of the Mitnagdim*."

The suspicion of interference by *Mitnagdim* wrongly promoting this account of the alleged "word for word" copying by the *Magid of Mezeritch* of *Sefer haTzoref* is also expressed by Scholem. He emphatically states that the version of the *Magid of Mezeritch's Likutei Amarim* that we have today is so vastly different from what we know of *Sefer haTzoref*, "as east is to west." The frequent and characteristic use of *Gematria* (numerology), *Notrikon* (acronyms) and *Razin de Razin* (secrets of secrets) by *Sefer haTzoref* is not nearly so evident in the contemporary version of *Likutei Amarim* – and instead, a far more scholarly style is manifest. This style matches the accounts of the *Magid of Mezeritch's* students concerning their scholarly teacher (Scholem 1941b:42).

Lending credence to the account by Perl, on the other hand, is the detail that there were two witnesses to this discovery of precisely copied texts from *Sefer haTzoref* appearing in the writings of the *Magid of Mezeritch* – namely, R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot and his colleague, R. Aharon Frenkel (Rabinowitsch 1941:82).

³³³ I assume that this time, he looked into *Sefer haTzoref* in greater detail than he did the first time, when he cast it into the bedchamber. Or perhaps he was able to view another section he had not seen previously.

³³⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl's newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot was so convinced of the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref* that, after spending more time reading it, he wrote on a blank page at the end of the manuscript of the *Sefer haTzoref* he had just inspected:

“The claim of R. Yehoshua of...Dinowitz that this manuscript [of *Sefer haTzoref*] was copied from a manuscript in the possession of the Baal Shem Tov and that the Baal Shem Tov had said that ‘through it, worlds can be constructed,’ is a falsification [because] the author of this book is from the sect of Shabbatai Tzvi [and therefore the Baal Shem Tov could not have made such a statement]” (Rabinowitsch 1941:82).³³⁵

When R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz saw this insertion, he strongly objected and insisted that R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev had praised *Sefer haTzoref* and its author. Sometime later, when this event became known to R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev he was infuriated with both R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot and R. Aharon Frenkel for not believing R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz. R. Aharon Frenkel duly sent a letter of apology to R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. However, R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot was more circumspect and challenged R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev to send the entire (three volumes³³⁶ of) *Sefer haTzoref* to him so that he could send it to R. Pinchas, the head of the rabbinical court of Frankfurt am Main, for final adjudication. If he ruled in favour of R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev – that the book was not of *Sabbatian* provenance – then R. Margoliot offered to print and publish the entire work and agreed to go to the grave of R. Heshil Tzoref and plead for forgiveness. If, however, the judge found in favour of R. Margoliot – that the work was *Sabbatian* – then the Jewish world had to be informed of that fact.

R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot was making the point that examining for a nexus, or lack thereof, between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism* was no trivial or mere theoretical exercise. Instead, it was a vital, fundamental and pivotal question to be urgently resolved, as he believed the direction of future Judaism would be determined by its outcome. R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot maintained that if he could neutrally and

³³⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl's newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

³³⁶ It appears that, originally, it may have been thought that there were only three sections of *Sefer haTzoref* and not five as per Scholem (1930:240) and Liebes (2007:2). Unless, of course, they only had possession of three, out of the known five, volumes.

independently confirm his suspicion of a *Sabbatian* link to *Chassidism* he would have “*preserved the soul of the Jewish nation*” (Rabinowitsch 1941:82).³³⁷ Unfortunately, R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev did not acknowledge, or respond to, the letter from R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot and this important question was not resolved.

Perl vouches that “*every single word [of this episode] as written here*” (Rabinowitsch 1941:82)³³⁸ was documented by R. Aharon Frenkel in the presence of three other rabbis.³³⁹

As mentioned earlier, the claim is often made that those who held copies of *Sefer haTzoref* were “*completely unaware of its Sabbatian nature*” (Maciejko 2010b:n.p.). Scholem (2007a:671; 1941b:42) states that even the Baal Shem Tov “*held these writings in high veneration without seemingly having been aware of their Shabbatean character.*” Surprisingly, Joseph Perl was also one of the early promoters of the supposition that the Baal Shem Tov – including his later successors – were “*completely unaware*” of the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref*. He proposes that *Sefer haTzoref* came to the Baal Shem Tov through some of the “*remnants of the sect of Shabbatai Tzvi.*”³⁴⁰ Perl maintains that the Baal Shem Tov was not capable of differentiating *Sabbatian* literature from other forms of Jewish literature since he was essentially illiterate in biblical and rabbinic writings (Rabinowitsch 1941:83).³⁴¹

Perl posits that when the Baal Shem Tov saw the *Sefer haTzoref*, he simply regarded it as a deep *Kabbalistic* work containing the secrets of the universe; therefore, he declared that “*through it, worlds can be constructed.*” Perl continues to suggest that this work was indeed important to the Baal Shem Tov who guarded it carefully and only handed it down to his main students, including R. Dovber, the *Magid of Mezeritch*. The latter then copied much of the material in *Sefer haTzoref* verbatim

³³⁷ Translation in mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl’s newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

³³⁸ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl’s newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

³³⁹ The three rabbis were R. Moshe Frieling, R. Yitzchak Michal Manes and R. Betzalel Stern.

³⁴⁰ Translation is mine. Perl (Rabinowitsch 1941:83) (see footnote 331) is of the view that the *Sabbatian* movement had run its course during the few decades between Shabbatai Tzvi and the Baal Shem Tov. He refers to “*remnants*” of the *Sabbatian* movement that had already “*ceased*” by the time of the Baal Shem Tov. This view, however, does not correspond to evidence adduced in this study.

³⁴¹ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl’s newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

in his *Likutei Amarim* and even added to it in a similar writing style. Other leaders of the *Chassidic* movement perpetuated that same literary style in their literature which later became known as *Chassidut*.

Perl (Rabinowitsch 1941:83)³⁴² develops this idea even further by advocating that all the identifiably *Chassidic* customs – such as *Deveikut* (*attachment to God*), *Hitlahavut* (*enthusiasm*), *Harchakot haAtzvut* (*distancing from sadness*), *Zemirot* (*singing*), *Rikudim* (*dancing*), and *Hakaot Kaf* (*clapping hands*) were similarly adopted from the “sect of *Shabbatai Tzvi*.” These practices were all taken from *Sefer haTzoref*, and this way, *Sabbatian* practices were unwittingly transferred from the *Sabbatian* movement to the *Chassidic* movement.³⁴³ Scholem (1943b:43), however, argues that only two of these practices were adopted from the *Sabbatians*, namely “*dancing and singing*.”

In my view – based on earlier arguments demonstrating the extreme permeation of *Sabbatian literature*, and the integration of numerous *Sabbatian* rabbinic personalities, into the fabric of Jewish society – the notion that the Baal Shem Tov did not know that he had an openly *Sabbatian* manuscript; and that he was unaware that its author was a leader of the *Sabbatian* movement, is something that seems highly improbable. A contentious work by an acknowledged leader of *Sabbatianism* – with references to a blatant *Sabbatian* creed at a time when suspicions of *Sabbatianism* hung heavy over the heads of so many rabbis – would not have slipped into a *Chassidic* library unnoticed, especially during the second generation of *Chassidic* leaders. Rabbinic libraries are known to be extremely cautious, admitting only carefully vetted works that are deemed appropriate and not tainted by extraneous influences. Already from 1670, which was about thirty years before the Baal Shem Tov was born, the mainstream rabbinate had declared *Sabbatianism* to be the most acute form of extraneous ideology (Maciejko 2011:36) and someone possessing *Sefer haTzoref* would likely have been well aware of the risk of housing such a work – especially considering that it espoused R. Heshil Tzoref’s view that he was *Mashiach ben Yosef* and Shabbatai Tzvi was *Mashiach ben David* (Scholem 1972b:354).

³⁴² Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl’s newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

³⁴³ If Perl had tendentious and anti-*Chassidic* intentions, as Rabinowitsch cautions, it is difficult to understand why Perl would have gone out of his way to deny that the Baal Shem Tov and his *Chassidim* knew the *Sabbatian* connections to *Sefer haTzoref* (see footnote 331).

According to Perl's account (Rabinowitsch 1941:81),³⁴⁴ multiple leaders of the *Chassidic* movement were aware, not just of the existence of *Sefer haTzoref*, but also of the esteem in which the book was apparently held by the Baal Shem Tov who had an original copy in his possession. Rabinowitsch's research assistant, David Bachlinski, 'discovered' a handwritten copy of *Sefer haTzoref* in the library of the *Chassidic* court of Stolin in 1937 (Melamed 2012:n.p.). Joseph Perl is not discreet about his description of the book as an openly *Sabbatian* work that directly influenced *Chassidic* teachings and the early generations of *Chassidism*. He writes:

"The 'Sefer haTzoref' by the Sabbatian Kabbalist R. Yehoshua Heshil Tzoref and the influence it exerted over Chassidic teachings, particularly over the Baal Shem Tov and the great Maggid, R. Dovber of Mezeritch still requires much research" (Rabinowitsch 1941:82).³⁴⁵

Yet Perl still maintains that *Sefer haTzoref* entered the literary domain of the early *Chassidic* movement and got passed down its ranks without its *Sabbatian* nature being detected. Perl writes:

"[T]he other leaders of the Beshtnim [i.e., Chassidim, simply] followed in his [the Maggid of Mezeritch's] footsteps...and they did not know that the source of their customs and rites were corrupted" (Rabinowitsch 1941:83).³⁴⁶

Scholem (1941b:43) also goes along with this notion that the early generations of *Chassidim* were unaware of the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref*. It is, however, difficult to accept that the early *Chassidic* leaders venerated a primary source of their literature by accident while remaining entirely unaware of its *genre*, author and origin. This, particularly in an environment already saturated with open and known suspicions of *Sabbatian literature* and *Sabbatian personalities* vying, often deceptively, for incorporation into the mainstream.

³⁴⁴ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl's newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

³⁴⁵ Translation is mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl's newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

³⁴⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl's newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

Before leaving Perl's account of R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot's exposure of the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref*, I want to include an observation by Israel Bartal. Bartal points to the stark contrast between the “*anti-Chassidic*” (i.e., Perl's) version and the “*Chassidic*” version in the hagiographical biography of the Baal Shem Tov as portrayed in *Shivchei haBesht*. Bartal suggests that *Shivchei haBesht* was aware of the anti-*Chassidic* polemic promoting the incriminating charge by R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot that the Baal Shem Tov possessed a *Sabbatian* work, *Sefer haTzoref*. *Shivchei haBesht*, therefore, countered that negative narrative by incorporating two positive stories promoting the Baal Shem Tov's intense opposition to another *Sabbatian* work, *Chemdat Yamim*³⁴⁷ – whose author, it emphasises, was “a member of the sect of Shabbetai Tsevi, may his name be blotted out” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:85-86). Interestingly, in both stories in *Shivchei haBesht*, the owners of the book *Chemdat Yamim* were not initially aware of the *Sabbatian* nature of their acquisitions, and this point is rather laboured in the rendering. This initial ‘unawareness’ and ‘naiveté,’ has a familiar ring to it echoing the polemic surrounding the controversial *Sefer haTzoref* but without mentioning its title. This way, *Shivchei haBesht* acts as a “*Chassidic*” counter-narrative to the “*anti-Chassidic*” version, allowing for a degree of ‘innocence,’ and the question of *Sabbatianism* is totally negated. Bartal is of the view that the charge of *Sabbatianism* against the *Chassidim* is totally unfounded and he claims that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, when *Shivchei haBesht* was produced, no one, other than the members of the Enlightenment, would have taken the charge seriously. He suggests that the author of *Shivchei haBesht* was not concerned about the charge of *Sabbatianism* per se – only about the charge that the early *Chassidim* made *inadvertent* use of *Sabbatian* literature. Hence the emphasis in the two stories in *Shivchei haBesht* on the initial *inadvertent* use of *Chemdat Yamim* but that once its *Sabbatian* nature had been ascertained, the book was rejected and disposed of (Bartal 1985:28).

Having examined *Sefer haTzoref* in the writings of Joseph Perl and discussed its reception in early *Chassidism*, we shall now turn to the interpretation of the same work in the more recent account by R. Aryeh Kaplan.

³⁴⁷ See section 4.6.

4.7.3 *Sefer haTzoref* in the account of R. Aryeh Kaplan

Because of the pivotal role R. Heshil Tzoref appears to have played as a link between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, Scholem shows how Tzoref was popularly identified as R. Adam Baal Shem, the presumed mystical teacher of the Baal Shem Tov. Scholem, referring to the relationship between the Baal Shem Tov and the writings in *Sefer haTzoref*, maintains:

“[The] Ba’al Shem Tov...frequently spoke in their [the writings of *Sefer haTzoref*] praise, and the tradition of his pupils identified them with those of the mythical rabbi Adam Ba’al Shem... [Therefore] Adam Ba’al Shem[,] a legendary figure of the 16th century, and Heshel Zoref in the generation preceding that of the Ba’al Shem [at the end of the 17th century], coalesced into one figure” (Scholem 2007a:671).³⁴⁸

Thus, according to Scholem, there existed internal traditions amongst the *Chassidim* themselves that: 1) the pupils of the Baal Shem Tov were familiar with *Sefer haTzoref*; and 2) R. Heshil Tzoref was identified as the figure of R. Adam Baal Shem (regardless of the anachronism of such a conflation).

Aryeh Kaplan adopts a more interactive position where the elusive R. Adam Baal Shem has a direct relationship with the Baal Shem Tov, and physically hands over to him “a set of mystical writings” (Kaplan 1982:270). Kaplan’s view is most likely based on the hagiographical account in *Shivchei haBesht*, where, just before his death, R. Adam Baal Shem tells his son:

“I have manuscripts here which hold the secrets of the Torah. But you do not merit them. Search for...Israel ben Eliezer. He is about fourteen years old. You will hand him the manuscripts...” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:15).

In *Shivchei haBesht* there are numerous and distinct references to “secret manuscripts.”³⁴⁹ R. Adam Baal Shem’s son eventually is said to have located the Baal Shem Tov who was an attendant at the study hall of Okopy, in Podolia, Western

³⁴⁸ Square brackets are mine.

³⁴⁹ Even the title of this story is “*The Secret Manuscripts and Rabbi Adam’s son*” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:15).

Ukraine. One night, when the Baal Shem Tov was studying, he was so tired that he fell asleep and:

“[t]he son of Rabbi Adam got up and took one folio of the manuscripts, put it before the Besht [i.e., the Baal Shem Tov] ...When the Besht woke up and saw the folio in front of him, he was deeply stirred. He studied it and then concealed it in the inner fold of his garment” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:17).³⁵⁰

Finally, the son was able to “*hand over the manuscripts*” while informing the Baal Shem Tov of how his father, R. Adam, “*left me these manuscripts and ordered me to give them to you*” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:17). There is no doubt that the writer of this account in *Shivchei haBesht* is intent on conveying the idea that a *physical* and *secret* set of *manuscripts* was the nucleus of what was to become the future thought of the Baal Shem Tov. The story continues with R. Adam’s son and the Baal Shem Tov forming a close bond and they moved to a place of “*more seclusion outside of the city*” which became “*their house of solitude*” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:17). This again alludes to the enigmatic nature of these secret manuscripts which had to be studied privately. The closest the writer of *Shivchei haBesht* ventures to describe the actual content of the documents is:

“In the abovementioned manuscripts there was both Divine Kabbalah and Practical Kabbalah” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:17).³⁵¹

Perhaps building on this account in *Shivchei haBesht* – which contains no explicit reference to R. Heshil Tzoref nor to his *Sefer haTzoref* – Kaplan boldly suggests:

“There has been considerable speculation as to the nature of these writings, but in part at least, it is almost certain they consisted of *Sefer HaTzoref* (Book of the Smith), which had been written by Rabbi Heschel Tzoref (1623-1700)...[I]t appears that Rabbi Heschel...was a leading figure among the [Society of hidden mystics known as the] Nistarim [the ‘hidden ones’]” (Kaplan 1982:270).³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Square brackets are mine.

³⁵¹ This seems to allude to theosophy and theurgy.

³⁵² Square brackets are mine.

Kaplan is one of the few scholars within the *Chassidic* movement to venture into conjecture as to the seemingly controversial authorship of these alleged manuscripts which were handed over by R. Adam Baal Shem. Kaplan then continues with an open reference to *Sabbatianism*:

“Rabbi Heschel maintained that the Society [of Nistarim, the ‘hidden ones’] should go above-ground and openly refute the accusations of its detractors. Emphasizing this point, in 1666, the year of Sabbatai Zvi's apostacy, he began to publicly teach Kabbalah in Vilna” (Kaplan 1982:270).³⁵³

However, Kaplan (1982:271) stops short of associating R. Heshil Tzoref with *Sabbatianism*. On the contrary, Tzoref is described as one *unjustly* suspected of Sabbatianism:

“Along with many mystics of that time, Tzoref was accused of having associations with the followers of Sabbatai Zvi, and correspondence was even forged to prove these allegations. Such witchhunts, however, were very common at the time, and everything dealing with the Kabbalah was suspect” (Kaplan 1982:271).

Kaplan bolsters his argument by giving examples of mystical manuscripts that had been falsely attributed to Shabbatai Tzvi. One was *Chayei haOlam haBa*, written by R. Avraham Abulafia in 1280, three and a half centuries before Shabbatai Tzvi. Kaplan suggests that since R. Heshil Tzoref “*followed the methods of tzeruf [i.e., combinations of letters] advocated by Abulafia, it, too, became suspect.*”³⁵⁴

Thus, although Kaplan (1982:270) goes so far as to associate parts of the hidden and secretive mystical tradition believed to have been received by the Baal Shem Tov from R. Adam Baal Shem, as “*almost certain[ly]*” being the physical manuscripts of *Sefer haTzoref* – he does not go as far as to associate R. Heshil Tzoref and his *Sefer haTzoref* with any vestige of *Sabbatianism* whatsoever.

This investigation, however, probes this matter further, and attempts to demonstrate the certainty of R. Heshil Tzoref's association with *Sabbatian* leaders as

³⁵³ Square brackets are mine.

³⁵⁴ Square brackets are mine.

well as the certainty of the *Sabbatian* content of *Sefer haTzoref*. Kaplan's view is diametrically opposed to that of Scholem who maintains that:

“Although the Shabbatean character of Zoref's revelations is clear, he did not divulge his faith except to members of his intimate circle who had to take a formal vow to show discretion and dissimulation before unbelievers” (Scholem 2007a:670).³⁵⁵

Let us now turn to further research on the association between *Sefer haTzoref* and R. Adam Baal Shem.

4.7.4 Associations between *Sefer haTzoref* and R. Adam Baal Shem

Building on the enigmatic figure of the mystical, or mythical, teacher of R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov – R. Adam Baal Shem (see the previous section 4.7.3) – I want to examine R. Adam Baal Shem's projected 'association' or 'conflation' with R. Heshil Tzoref in greater detail. David Assaf (Scholem 1941b:60)³⁵⁶ rightly notes that a veritable polemic was awakened by Scholem when he raised the question of a possible affinity between R. Heshil Tzoref and R. Adam Baal Shem.

The anonymity associated with the name *Adam* (lit. a *man*) has led to much speculation as to his identity. Adam was not a common Jewish name, particularly in Poland at that time. Yaffa Eliach suggests a possible connection between R. Adam Baal Shem and the theologian Adam Zernikov who was born in 1652 in Königsberg. Adam Zernikov soon became dissatisfied with the fractured Lutheran Church and turned to the Greek Orthodox Church. After travelling to Oxford, Paris, Milan, and Venice, he settled in Eastern Podolia where he attended the Batyrincki monastery at Chernigov. Later he was appointed the military advisor to the Hetman (military commander) of Baturin who ruled between 1687 and 1708. Baturin was a fortress city in Ukraine which had over forty churches and two monasteries. The opening narrative of *Shivchei haBesht* describes "the king's adviser" or "viceroys" to whom the Baal Shem Tov's father, Eliezer, was appointed to assist after being taken captive (*Shivchei*

³⁵⁵ Scholem's view (2007a:670) here, emphasising Tzoref's secrecy and "discretion," seems incompatible with his earlier view on the very same page that Tzoref was the "outstanding spokesman of the believers in Shabbetai Zevi."

³⁵⁶ Regarding this citation it must be noted that David Assaf is writing in an appendix to the article by Gershom Scholem (1941b:41-63).

haBesht tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:8). Eliach proposes that there may be some connection between "the king's adviser" in the hagiographical *Shivchei haBesht*, and the historical Adam Zernikov who was the "adviser to the Hetman of Baturin" (Eliach 1968:68):

"...Adam thus met Eliezer. Adam, himself a foreigner (a Prussian, born in Koenigsberg in 1652), might well have taken an interest in Eliezer, who spoke Yiddish, a dialect of German" (Eliach 1968:68).

Shivchei haBesht later goes on to describe how R. Adam Baal Shem instructs his son to deliver the secret manuscripts to the Baal Shem Tov (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:15). Eliach notes that in this albeit hagiographical account, R. Adam Baal Shem is described as having:

"very accurate information: the name of the Besht, his father, the specific town, and even the Besht's age. This precise information is attributed to a supernatural act: it was revealed to R. Adam in a dream. It is more likely, however, that he got this information from Eliezer" (Eliach 1968:68).

Although Eliach does not promote the notion, as suggested by Scholem (1941b:44), that R. Adam Baal Shem was conflated with R. Heshil Tzoref the silversmith (sometimes referred to as a goldsmith), I did notice that Adam Zernikov's father, Christian, was a goldsmith and his mother Maria was the daughter of a goldsmith.³⁵⁷ In any event, Eliach does suggest a possible conflation between Adam Zernikov and R. Adam Baal Shem.

On the other hand, Scholem (1941b:43) notes that before 1937 – when Rabinowitsch discovered *Sefer haTzoref* in a *Geniza* in Stolin (see section 4.7.1) – scholars thought that the story of R. Adam Baal Shem (as it is told in *Shivchei haBesht*)³⁵⁸ and his secret mystical writings which he is said to have handed over to the Baal Shem Tov, was either a fabrication or a weak historical claim.

³⁵⁷ Online source: <https://zoernikav.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/zoernikav-bio-pictures/> Retrieved on 27 November 2023.

³⁵⁸ See *Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz (1994:15-18). See also the different version in the *Kherson Geniza* which has the Baal Shem Tov describe the 'secret writings' from R. Adam Baal Shem being hidden, for him to find, under a large stone: "And my [i.e., R. Adam's] son...will hide them under a [certain] stone, amongst the mountains which surround the holy community of Kitov. This way, with God's help, they [the writings] will surely reach

In the original Hebrew accounts of *Shivchei haBesht*, Adam appears without any honorifics at all. It is only in the Yiddish translations that he is referred to as a “*Baal Shem Tov*” and “*R. Adam*” (Scholem 1941b:45). However, Scholem continues, the discovery of *Sefer haTzoref* – and particularly the account of the First Copyist, R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz (see section 4.7.1) where he testifies that the Baal Shem Tov had possession of *Sefer haTzoref* – lends credence to the general tenor of the story of the Baal Shem Tov receiving ‘secret writings’ from a previous important figure.

Scholem (1941b:43), as mentioned earlier (see section 4.7.2), argues that the early generations of *Chassidim* were unaware of the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref*. He maintains that it was only later, after the altercation between R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (d. 1809) and R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot (d. 1828) over the printing of *Sefer haTzoref* in around 1790 that *Sabbatian* suspicions were first aroused. This would have been about twenty years before the hagiographical biography of the Baal Shem Tov, the *Shivchei haBesht*, was published in 1814. This means that the allegations of the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref* would have been well-known by the time *Shivchei haBesht* was published.

Scholem (1941b:44) maintains that the contributors to *Shivchei haBesht* intentionally obscured the name of R. Heshil Tzoref as the author of the ‘writings’ which were now simply presented as having ‘manifested’ during five previous periods in history, including the times of the biblical Abraham and Joshua (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:32). This was the fifth ‘manifestation’ of the ‘writings’ and they were meant for the Baal Shem Tov. According to *Shivchei haBesht*, these writings were found by R. Adam Baal Shem “*in a cave*” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:13). These writings were later “*sealed*” and hidden away by the Baal Shem Tov in a “*stone in a mountain... [and he]³⁵⁹ placed a watchman there*” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:31). This way *Shivchei haBesht* retains the concept of the ‘secret writings,’ while negating the incident between R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev and R. Efraim Zalman Margoliot some twenty years earlier, and there is no mention of *Sefer haTzoref* or its author R. Heshil Tzoref. In its place, we have the episode of R. Adam Baal Shem. The name Adam is reminiscent of the biblical

your holy hand” (Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 75/a, 1975:18). Translation and square brackets are mine.

³⁵⁹ Square brackets are mine.

Adam, to whom the mystical tradition ascribes the first revelation of mystical writings through the agency of Raziel the Angel.³⁶⁰ Thus, the germ of traditionalism surrounding ‘secret writings’ remains while the taint of *Sabbatian* suspicion is entirely removed and R. Heshil Tzoref becomes conflated with R. Adam Baal Shem. Without R. Heshil Tzoref, R. Adam Baal Shem would not have existed, and:

“all the stories about [R. Adam Baal Shem] serve to cover over through ‘mists of purity,’ the paradox of the Baal Shem Tov possessing a Sabbatian book in his house...and [Shivchei haBesht] hid the name of the actual author of the writings” (Scholem 1941b:44).³⁶¹

This way, Scholem claims that *Shivchei haBesht* intentionally conflated R. Heshil Tzoref with an imaginary R. Adam Baal Shem and thus obscured his *Sabbatian* identity.

Chana Shmeruk (1963:100) takes a different view and rejects Scholem’s theory that the *Shivchei haBesht* merged the two characters of R. Heshil Tzoref and R. Adam Baal Shem into one. She insists that the overall style of *Shivchei haBesht* is, first and foremost, hagiography. Its primary intention is to be an inspirational work and to emphasise the supernatural and magical nature of its characters. Therefore, she argues, the work is unlikely to be concerned with character misattribution.

³⁶⁰ Zeev Gries elaborates on this imagery of the ‘five manifestations’ of the ‘secret writings.’ He suggests that one of the five revelations of these writings, which was to Yehoshua bin Nun, was not referring to the biblical figure Joshua, but rather a sixteenth century *Kabbalist* in Safed, who was known by that same name. This *Kabbalist* was instrumental in the spreading of *Lurianic* writings. He was well-known by the later *Chassidim*. This way, by emphasising a ‘*Lurianic* link’ in the chain of transmission of ‘secret writings,’ a more traditional provenance of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov is impressed upon the consciousness of the *Chassidim*, entirely sidestepping the question of *Sabbatianism* (Gries 1994:161-5). Etkes disagrees with Gries suggesting, instead, that this *Kabbalist* was *not* an influential figure. Furthermore, Etkes claims (with Joseph Dan) that many of these origin stories in general were simply intended to fill a lacuna in the early life of the Baal Shem Tov – and to show that the founder of *Chassidism* essentially had an ‘appropriate’ teacher. In this view, all the stories about R. Adam Baal Shem are entirely fabrications. Etkes agrees that the Baal Shem Tov had mystical teachings but he needed to maintain control over them to protect this career as an exclusive and unique wonder-worker. When questioned on the source of these teachings, they were ascribed to a mythical R. Adam Baal Shem (Etkes 2000:78-83). In any case, both Gries and Etkes are thus able to circumvent the question of *Sabbatian* origins to the Baal Shem Tov’s teachings.

³⁶¹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

David Assaf (Scholem 1941b:60)³⁶² adopts an intermediate position and suggests that in all likelihood, the Baal Shem Tov and his students did adopt *Sefer haTzoref* and “enshrine” its teachings into *Chassidism*. He supports this by the observation that as late as the first half of the nineteenth century, many *Chasidic Rebbes* still quoted openly from *Sefer haTzoref* and “without hesitation.” However, Assaf does not agree that the two characters of R. Heshil Tzoref and R. Adam Baal Shem were conflated; nor does he agree that the secret writings mentioned in *Shivchei haBesht* were specifically those of *Sefer haTzoref*, simply because:

אין בה כדי לקשור ספר זה דווקא אל הכתבים הגנוזים

“there is not enough [concrete evidence] to connect this book [*Sefer haTzoref*] to the hidden writings [mentioned in *Shivchei haBesht*]” (Scholem 1941b:60).³⁶³

Ada Rapoport-Albert also challenges Scholem. She first confirms and establishes that indeed, there is *no* evidence of a historical R. Adam Baal Shem:

“[N]othing is known of an historical Adam Baal Shem, and the information about him supplied by the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, which introduces him without naming his place of origin or any other geographical landmarks, is too fantastical to suggest any possible identification” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:133).

However, she does show that a seventeenth-century Yiddish hagiographical work claimed that a certain Adam Baal Shem lived in Prague during the late sixteenth century. Whether this claim is factual or not, the writer of *Shivchei haBesht* would most likely have been aware of this tradition and incorporated it anachronistically in his work. It is possible that the writer of *Shivchei haBesht* used his ‘poetic license’ to include this ‘historical’ figure which had the effect of bolstering the authority of the Baal Shem Tov and “conferring on his teaching the legitimacy of continuity and antiquity” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:133).

³⁶² Regarding this citation it must be noted that David Assaf is writing in an appendix to the article by Gershom Scholem (1941b:41-63).

³⁶³ Regarding this citation it must be noted that David Assaf is writing in an appendix to the article by Gershom Scholem (1941b:41-63).

Following this theme, the *Kherson Geniza*, building in turn on *Shivchei haBesht*, has R. Adam signing his name in 1731, at the conclusion of his letters, as “*Adam Baal Shem Tov from Ropshitz*”³⁶⁴ and not from Prague two centuries earlier. This interpretation side-steps the thorny issue of *Sabbatian* influences, and although R. Adam Baal Shem remains a vague and fanciful figure, one need not assume that R. Heshil Tzoref was intentionally conflated with R. Adam Baal Shem in order to hide the charge of a *Sabbatian* connection. R. Heshil Tzoref can be left out of the equation. Thus, *Shivchei haBesht* uses R. Adam Baal Shem not to disguise R. Heshil Tzoref and *Sabbatianism* – as per Scholem – but simply to create a ‘historical,’ albeit anachronistic R. Adam Baal Shem³⁶⁵ with apparent “*legitimacy of continuity and antiquity*” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:134).

Nevertheless, according to Scholem (1941b:44), R. Yisrael Yofeh – who printed *Shivchei haBesht* in 1814 and who was a follower of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) the first *Rebbe* of the *Chabad* dynasty of *Chassidim* – may have been motivated to some degree, to favour the *Chabad* narrative as adduced by his teacher. Since R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi promoted the ‘actual’ and ‘historical’ existence of R. Adam Baal Shem, it is not surprising that *Shivchei haBesht* followed suit. This brings us back to the thorny issue of the historical R. Heshil Tzoref being intentionally conflated with the identity of R. Adam Baal Shem.

This interpretation is reflected in the Translators’ Note to the English translation of *Shivchei haBesht* by Ben-Amos and Mintz (1994:xvi) who write that R. Yisrael Yofeh “*could not resist inserting a lengthy account which he had heard from his own master’s lips.*” This included the early section comprising the first sixteen stories of *Shivchei haBesht* which include the story of R. Adam Baal Shem.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ See Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 210/a, 1975:13.

³⁶⁵ The *Kherson Geniza* refers to R. Adam Baal Shem **Tov** and R. Yisrael Baal **Shem** instead of the way they are usually elsewhere represented as R. Adam Baal **Shem** and R. Yisrael Baal Shem **Tov**. Perhaps the *Kherson Geniza* intends to ascribe more authority to R. Adam Baal Shem Tov.

³⁶⁶ The story about R. Adam Baal Shem is story number 7 in *Shivchei haBesht*. The printer, R. Yisrael Yofeh, worked from the original biographical manuscript of *Shivchei haBesht* produced by R. Dovber ben Shmuel Baer. However, the original author’s work only begins to appear much later, from story number 17. This means that the story about R. Adam Baal Shem was heard from Yofeh’s teacher, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, and was *not* part of the original collection. “*The sixteen tales added in the beginning by the printer have a distinctly bookish flavor. The Hebrew employed in the original manuscript, on the other hand, is simple and often colloquial*” (Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:xvii). This indicates a tendentious rendering (certainly in the first sections) of *Shivchei haBesht*, promoting the school of *Chabad*.

Moshe Rosman sees R. Yisrael Yofeh's intentional incorporation of these stories about R. Adam Baal Shem into *Shivchei haBesht* a little differently. The stories still promote the *Chabad* narrative but form part of an ongoing succession polemic within *Chabad*. Besides R. Yisrael Yofeh being a student of R. Shneur Zalman, he was also a student of his son, R. Dovber Schneuri, known as the *Mitteler Rebbe*. After R. Shneur Zalman's passing in 1812, there was a succession battle over the future leadership of the *Chabad* movement between the first Rebbe's son, R. Dovber Schneuri and his steadfast student R. Aharon of Staroselye. R. Yisrael Yofeh thus introduced the character of R. Adam Baal Shem into *Shivchei haBesht* to support R. Dovber Schneuri as the legitimate candidate for the leadership role. In the story published in *Shivchei haBesht*, the leadership role is passed on from R. Adam Baal Shem – not to his son but instead to the Baal Shem Tov because the latter received possession of the 'secret writings.' In the *Chabad* polemic, R. Dovber Schneuri happened to be both the son and the possessor of the writings of R. Shneur Zalman the first *Rebbe*. He had inherited the writings from his father and therefore he stood in line to be the legitimate second *Rebbe* of *Chabad* over R. Aharon of Staroselye, who although worthy, did not inherit the writings (Rosman 1999:259).

Rosman's view supports the suspicion of Scholem (1941b:44) that there may have been tendentious motivations behind the "*nurture sources*" of *Shivchei haBesht*, perhaps promoting the narrative of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi and the *Chabad* dynasty. However, Rosman would differ from Scholem and not see the identity of R. Heshil Tzoref being intentionally conflated with that of R. Adam Baal Shem.

The identity and projected associations of the enigmatic figure of R. Adam Baal Shem are far from resolved and Assaf anticipates that this question will continue to preoccupy researchers of *Chassidism* well into the future (Scholem 1941b:63).³⁶⁷

We will now proceed to examine evidence of potential associations between *Sefer haTzoref* and R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov.

³⁶⁷ Regarding this citation it must be noted that David Assaf is writing in an appendix to the article by Gershom Scholem (1941b:41-63).

4.7.5 Associations between *Sefer haTzoref* and R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov

Examining possible links between the Baal Shem Tov and R. Heshil Tzoref is crucial to this study. According to Liebes (2007:12-13), the Baal Shem Tov was born in 1700, the same year R. Heshil passed away, and he was a great admirer of R. Heshil Tzoref. However, although the birth year of the Baal Shem Tov is usually given as 1700, or sometimes 1698, Heschel (1974:3) places it as early as around 1690. According to Rabinowitsch (1939:126), R. Heshil Tzoref passed away either in 1700 or 1720. Taking both extremes into account, it is possible that the lifespans of R. Heshil Tzoref and the Baal Shem Tov intersected by as much as thirty years. This would certainly have allowed for an actual relationship. Interestingly, a *Chassidic* tradition exists that the Baal Shem Tov ‘revealed’ himself and began his leadership when he was about thirty years old. The Baal Shem Tov may have seen himself as the next leader to carry the baton.

According to the Baal Shem Tov’s close student, R. Shabbatai of Rashkov – who was initially charged with copying the *Sefer haTzoref* (see section 4.7.1) – the Baal Shem Tov knew about R. Heshil Tzoref’s ‘spiritual awakening’ in 1648 (see section 2.5.1.1). R. Shabbatai of Rashkov, transmitted the following statement he claimed he heard directly from the Baal Shem Tov:

באשר בשנת ת"ח היה עת רצון, קול ה' יחולל אילות להוליד נשמת משיח. וכאשר
היה בעו"ה קיטרוג ר"ל, קיבל אותה הרב המחבר וחיבר כמה ספרים ע"י מעשה
התשובה שהיה בידו בעת

“Because the year 1648 was a time of grace, ‘The voice of God causes hinds to calve’³⁶⁸ in that [in that year] the soul of the Messiah was born.³⁶⁹ And because of our many sins, there was an accusation, Heaven forefend, [and] the rabbi and author [Heshil Tzoref] accepted it [the soul of the Messiah] and he compiled a number of books by

³⁶⁸ Psalms 29:9. See next note.

³⁶⁹ This refers to the *Zoharic* notion which speaks of the birth of the Messiah from a doe, which represents the *Shechinah*, by means of a snake bite to the womb. A detailed messianic explanation on the doe (as well as on the word ‘*ayalot*’) can be found in *Sefer haTzoref* 210-211.

means of the act of repentance which he had at that time”
(Rabinowitsch 1939:129).³⁷⁰

If accurate, this is an astounding testimony that the Baal Shem Tov was not only aware of the existence of R. Heshil Tzoref, but he also claimed that R. Heshil Tzoref had accepted the soul of the Messiah.

Liebes (2007:14) insists that the Baal Shem Tov indeed held the autographic manuscript of *Sefer haTzoref* in his possession, and that the Baal Shem Tov wrote the following inscription in his personal copy of *Sefer haTzoref*, apparently in his own handwriting:

הספר הלז חברו ויסדו ה"ה החכם השלם, רוח ה' דיבר בו ומלתו על לשונו, כבוד
שמו מו"ה העשיל צורף מק קראקא אשר היה רוח אחרת אתו, כמאמר הכתוב לב
טהור ברא לי וכו. ומן שמיא הוה דזכה לי לכמה וכמה סודות נפלאים ונוראים...והמה
כתב יד המחבר עצמו ומתוך כתלי כתבו ידע בו כי איננו שכל אנושי

“This book was compiled and established by the great rabbi, the perfect scholar, through whom the spirit of God spoke, and His [God’s] message was on his [Tzoref’s] tongue³⁷¹; his honour, our teacher and rabbi, the rabbi Heshil Tzoref from the community of Cracow,³⁷² who had had another spirit within him,³⁷³ as the verse says ‘Fashion a pure heart for me...’³⁷⁴ And from heaven it was that they made me meritorious [to receive] a number of wonderful and awesome secrets...and this is the handwriting of the author himself... and from within the covers of his writings, it is evident that this is not the [product of] human intellect.”³⁷⁵

³⁷⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that these words of R. Shabbatai of Rashkov were recorded by R. Yehoshua ben Aharon of Dinowitz, in the Introduction to his copy of *Sefer haTzoref*. This was later published by Rabinowitsch (1939:125-132).

³⁷¹ Similar to II Samuel 23:2. These words were said regarding King David.

³⁷² Although R. Heshil lived most of his life in Vilna, he moved to Cracow just before his death, and there he is buried.

³⁷³ As in Numbers 14:24. Here it seems to refer to a holy spirit or a spirit of prophecy.

³⁷⁴ Psalms 51:12: “Fashion a pure heart for me God; create in me a steadfast spirit.”

³⁷⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine. This is the inscription by the Baal Shem Tov in his handwriting in his copy of *Sefer haTzoref* (Liebes 2007:14). See also Rabinowitz (1939:128).

Based on this, Liebes (2007:15, footnote 90) suggests that it is feasible that the autograph of three hundred pages which is held at the National Library of Israel (see section 4.7.1) is from the very copy that the Baal Shem Tov had in his possession.

This pivotal claim that the Baal Shem Tov possessed *Sefer haTzoref* may be corroborated by Bachlinsky, who discovered *Sefer haTzoref* in 1937 (see section 4.7.1).³⁷⁶ Bachlinsky copied the entry of the First Copyist of *Sefer haTzoref*, R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz, which read as follows:

זה ספר הצורף הנמצא בבית אדונינו מורינו ורבינו הרב ריב"ש

"This *Sefer haTzoref* was found in the house of our master, teacher and rabbi, the rabbi, Ribash [R. Yisrael Baal Shem Tov]" (First Copyist's Introduction to *Sefer haTzoref*).³⁷⁷

Importantly, according to Scholem, the accounts rendered by the Copyists of *Sefer haTzoref* as preserved in Rabinowitsch (1939:128-9) are "*without doubt, completely accurate and contain no defects*" (Scholem 1941b:41).³⁷⁸

In that same year, 1937, Bachlinsky wrote to Rabinowitsch, informing him that besides his discovery of *Sefer haTzoref*, he had also found, in the cellar in Stolin, a copy of the *Zohar* which was the *personal Zohar* belonging to the Baal Shem Tov, although there were no inscriptions in it (Melamed 2012:n.p.). This supports the notion

³⁷⁶ Melamed (2012:n.p.) considers Bachlinsky to be somewhat devious in his intention to publicise *Sefer haTzoref*. He suggests that Bachlinsky displayed a "*fixation*" with this find over the many other important finds in the *Stolin Geniza*. This was, Melamed maintains, because, as an enlightened scholar, "*part of the attraction of Sefer Ha-zoref was in its potential role in undermining the Hasidic self-image.*" Melamed may be correct, but I would argue that while Bachlinsky did indeed write, in his letter to Rabinowitsch, that *Sefer haTzoref* "*had a major influence on the founder of Hasidism,*" this was 1937, and there had not yet been much research into the *Sabbatian* nature of *Sefer haTzoref*. At that early stage, all Bachlinsky knew about *Sefer haTzoref* was that "*[f]rom a purely historical perspective the book is of little value since it does not at all mention the movement of Shabbtai Zevi though the author lived at this very period. (The book may contain some hints that could be deciphered only by insiders.) ...On the other hand, the book is an unfailing source for both theoretical and practical Kabbalah.*" This does not sound like someone trying to undermine *Chassidism* by claiming *Sabbatian* origins to the movement. Instead, Bachlinsky seem more interested in the general *Kabbalistic* content of *Sefer haTzoref* which concerned the "*theoretical and practical Kabbalah,*" and that "*had a major influence on the founder of Hasidism.*" It is correct that, about three years later – once the *Sabbatian* component of *Sefer haTzoref* was more fully explored and recognised – Rabinowitsch (not Bachlinsky) then emphasised that this "*long manuscript*" had been written by a "*Sabbatean prophet,*" and that "*the copiers of the book pray that the merit of the Sabbatian author shall shelter them.*"

³⁷⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine. See Rabinowitsch (1939:128).

³⁷⁸ Translation is mine.

that some of the personal books belonging to the Baal Shem Tov may have been preserved in this archive in Stolin, including his personal copy (if not the autographic copy) of *Sefer haTzoref*. Taking into consideration all these various testimonies and accounts, the evidence indicating that the Baal Shem Tov possessed the book *Sefer haTzoref* by the *Sabbatian* leader R. Heshil Tzoref, is quite convincing.

We will now examine the possible ongoing associations between the Baal Shem Tov's son and grandson, and *Sefer haTzoref*.

4.7.6 Associations between *Sefer haTzoref* and the Baal Shem Tov's son and grandson

Liebes (2007:15) explains that the Baal Shem Tov, was not satisfied with just his autograph of *Sefer haTzoref*, and he wanted to copy it. To this end, he handed over the manuscript in his possession to R. Shabbatai of Rashkov for him to copy. According to Scholem (2007a:671), however, the work was only finally copied two decades after the Baal Shem Tov's passing. This is how the First Copyist of *Sefer haTzoref*, R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz describes the provenance of this work, in his Introduction (which, in turn, was later copied by Bachlinsky when he was researching the archive in Stolin):

וסיפר לי מו"ר ר' שבתי שהיה בדעת הריב"ש להעתיקו. ונתן לו להעתיקו ולא גרמה
הזמן עד שנתבקש הרב הריב"ש בישיבה של מעלה ובא בן הרב ר' צבי הירש זללה"ה
ולקח מביתו הספר הזה עד שנתגלגל הדבר לעת ובא הספר הזה ליד בן ר' צבי הירש
ה"ה החכם מו"ה אהרן נ"י והסכים בדעתו לדעת רבי ומורי ישעי' הלוי אשר היה מ"ם
בק' דינאוויץ להעתיק את הספר הזה בראות את יקר הספר הזה אשר הולך לאיבוד
כי הדפין הולכין למחוק. והנה קמתי אני הצעיר אשר מתאבק תחת רגלי הצדיקים,
וציוה לי הרב מו"ר הרב ר' ישעי' להעתיקו

"R. Shabbatai [of Rashkov] informed me [R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz] of the intention of the Baal Shem Tov to have had [*Sefer haTzoref*] copied. He [the Baal Shem Tov] then gave it to him [R. Shabbatai of Rashkov] to copy. In the meantime, the Baal Shem Tov was called to the Heavenly academy. Then the rabbi's [i.e., the Baal Shem Tov's] son, Tzvi Hirsch...came and took the book from his [i.e., R. Shabbatai of Rashkov's] house. With the passage of time, the book came into the possession of his [i.e., R. Tzvi Hirsch's] son...R. Aharon...and he

agreed with my [i.e., R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz's] rabbi and teacher, R. Yeshaya of Dinowitz who was the righteous preacher the community of Dinowitz, to have this book copied when it became evident that this precious book was deteriorating as the pages were worn. I [R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz] then rose [to the occasion] as my rabbi and teacher [R. Yeshaya of Dinowitz] instructed me to copy [this book]" (First Copyist's Introduction to *Sefer haTzoref*).³⁷⁹

The handing down of the autograph of *Sefer haTzoref* through the three generations from the Baal Shem Tov to his son R. Tzvi Hirsch, and in turn to his son, R. Aharon of Titov – as a family heirloom – is further support attesting to the Baal Shem Tov's possession of this important work.

One of the great mysteries of the *Chassidic* movement is why the Baal Shem Tov's only son, R. Tzvi Hirsch, is somehow lost to its recorded history. This opaqueness surrounding R. Tzvi Hirsch is all the more conspicuous when one considers the emphasis the *Chassidic* movement was later to place on dynasty and lines of transmission of leadership. These lines passed from father to son, often for generations. Yet, with the Baal Shem Tov, the line seemed to pass, instead, through his daughter, Adel.³⁸⁰

Rapoport-Albert (1988:136) suggests that reflecting the later *Chassidic* emphasis on lines of dynastic succession, back onto the Baal Shem Tov, is anachronistic. However, Liebes (2007:15) maintains that the excessive allegiance of both R. Tzvi Hirsch and his son R. Aharon of Titov to *Sefer haTzoref* was at variance with the new spirit of *Chassidism* as developed under the leadership of the R. Dovber, the *Magid of Mezeritch*, the official successor to the Baal Shem Tov.³⁸¹ On this view, it was because of their continual and unconcealed touting of *Sefer haTzoref*, that R.

³⁷⁹ See Rabinowitsch (1939:129). Square brackets, translation and punctuation are mine.

³⁸⁰ R. Efraim of Sidilkov (1748-1800) and R. Baruch of Medzebozh (1753-1811) became great *Chassidic* leaders and they were both sons of Adel. Her grandson, through her daughter Feiga, was the well-known *Chassidic Rebbe*, R. Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810).

³⁸¹ Liebes (2007:15-16) also distances the *Magid of Mezeritch* from *Sefer haTzoref*, and denies the allegation in Perl's account, that the *Magid of Mezeritch* had copied sections of *Sefer haTzoref* "word for word" (see section 4.7.2).

Tzvi Hirsch and his son R. Aharon of Titov were essentially side-lined by the *Chassidic* movement.³⁸²

Perhaps, in support of Liebes' contention that the three generations of the Baal Shem Tov, his son and his grandson – who fell under the influence of *Sefer haTzoref* – is the indication by the First Copyist, R. Yehoshua of Dinowitz, that the book needed to be copied because it was well-used and “*deteriorating as the pages were worn*” (First Copyist's Introduction to *Sefer haTzoref*).³⁸³

4.7.7 Synthesis

I had earlier (see section 4.6.1) referred to *Sefer haTzoref* as an *indisputably Sabbatian* work. Yet, we saw that a scholar within the *Chassidic* movement, R. Aryeh Kaplan (see section 4.7.3), while acknowledging that the ‘secret writings’ handed down to the Baal Shem Tov were most likely those of *Sefer haTzoref*, claimed emphatically that neither the book nor the author were connected to the *Sabbatianism*. Accordingly, in Kaplan's view, both R. Heshil Tzoref and his work had *unjustly* been accused of *Sabbatianism*. I have, however, tried to demonstrate that the body of evidence overwhelmingly leans towards my original depiction of *Sefer haTzoref* as an *indisputably Sabbatian* work. I maintain that this is why the majority of the work has intentionally been ‘lost’ and become ‘unknown’ to history, even though it passed through the hands of so many important early *Chassidic* Rebbes.

It is strange that the later followers, who are usually so thirsty for information about their leaders, know so little about a work that was apparently so dear to the Baal Shem Tov. If *Sefer haTzoref* was allowed to survive, the followers could have claimed that the Baal Shem Tov was not aware of its *Sabbatian* nature. This would not have been out of order considering that even some scholars, like Maciejko (2010b:n.p.), Scholem (2007a:671; 1941b:42) and Perl (Rabinowitsch 1941:83),³⁸⁴ held that view.

³⁸² It is of interest to note that contemporary *Chassidic* hagiography somewhat plays down the role of R. Aharon of Titov who is described, perhaps politely, as being “*exceedingly humble*” and a “*reluctant Rebbe*” who “*refused to leverage his noble lineage to generate charitable donations.*” Online source: https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5513769/jewish/The-Reluctant-Rebbe.htm. Retrieved on 20 September 2023.

³⁸³ Translation is mine. See Rabinowitsch (1939:129).

³⁸⁴ Regarding the last citation, please note that Zev Rabinowitsch published Joseph Perl's newly discovered notes (see footnote 331).

Yet, the followers were not even afforded that opportunity because the work and its story all but vanished.

Anecdotally, I have asked some respected *Chassidic* rabbis I know, for their views on *Sefer haTzoref* and its author, R. Heshil Tzoref. Surprisingly, not one was aware of the *work* or the *author*. This is one of the reasons why this study adopts a neglected *literature and personalities* approach to investigating the rise of *Chassidism*.

Before leaving this section on elusive and hidden writings, I want to show how this *genre* of ‘secret writings’ is reflected in another body of literature, the *Kherson Geniza*.

4.8 References to ‘secret writings’ in the *Kherson Geniza*

The *Kherson Geniza* is an archive of letters – allegedly from the Baal Shem Tov and the early *Rebbes* of the *Chassidic* movement – regarded by the academic world as fraudulent (see section 5.2.3) but accepted by many *Chassidim*, especially *Chabad*, as being authentic. Notwithstanding very convincing evidence that the letters are forgeries (see section 5.2), the fact that many in the *Chassidic* world consider these letters to be genuine, makes them an important resource. This is because, whether genuine or not, the archive shows how a *culture of secrecy* was conceptualised to have surrounded the nature of the early mystical teachings that the Baal Shem Tov is said to have received. This *culture of secrecy*, and the notion that the Baal Shem Tov received ‘secret writings’ was upheld and perpetuated – even by a forger – within significant internal traditions of the *Chassidic* community.

Examining some excerpts from the controversial *Kherson Geniza* may be useful as they often ‘correspond’ to references such as the abovementioned account in *Shivchei haBesht* (see section 4.7.4),³⁸⁵ where the Baal Shem Tov was to have “concealed...[the secret writings]³⁸⁶ in the inner fold of his garment” (*Shivchei haBesht*

³⁸⁵ There are instances where the *Kherson Geniza* does *not* correspond to *Shivchei haBesht*, such as Document 51, in which R. Adam Baal Shem Tov is said to have sent a letter to the Baal Shem Tov. In *Shivchei haBesht*, R. Adam is described as having passed away before his son managed to locate the Baal Shem Tov and transfer the ‘teachings.’ In Document 51, however, R. Adam writes: “I was overjoyed when I heard that you have received in your holy hand the writings [I sent you]. But study them and learn them diligently, and in them, you will taste a great taste” (Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol. 1, 1975:251). Translation is mine. (Note that the numbers of the documents of the *Kherson Geniza* are sometimes replicated.)

³⁸⁶ Square brackets are mine.

tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:17). Additionally, the following samples indicate that the notion of ‘*secret writings*’ was often referenced and “*known*,” and the rabbi from whom these writings originated was also “*well-known*.”³⁸⁷

1) The following letter is allegedly written by the Baal Shem Tov to his wife requesting her to hide the writings originating “*from the well-known rabbi*”:

ב"ה יום ב' קרח ת"ק"ט מעזבוז
לעקרת ביתי מ' לאה רחל תחי'
אבקשך להסתיר את כל אשר מסרתי לך קודם הנסיעה ואפילו מהרב הידוע ג"כ
תסתיר כי בנפשך הוא ובזה אשאר לך ברב ת"ח
ד' אישך
ישראל במוה"ר אליעזר בע"ש
הבנים ב"ה בחו"ש ודו"ש

“BH

Monday [Parshat] Korach 5519 [1759] Medzebuzh:

To my wife M[arat] Leah Rachel *tc'y* [may you live],

I request that you hide all that I had given over to you before [I left on] the journey.

And even hide [the writings received] from the well-known rabbi – [this is important and] it all depends on you.

With this, I remain most appreciative.

Your husband,

Yisrael son of our teacher R. Eliezer Baal Shem. Medzebuzh.

[P.S.] The children are, thank G-d, alive [well] and peaceful – and they send greetings” (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.2, Document 51, 1975:557).³⁸⁸

³⁸⁷ See the following *Kherson Geniza* Documents 20 and 51 respectively.

³⁸⁸ Translation and square brackets are mine.

2) This letter is presented as written by the Baal Shem Tov to his friend R. Mordechai of Telusk requesting that he urgently bring him the known 'secret writings':³⁸⁹

תקח אתך הכתבים הידועים לך ממוריגו הק' ג"ע כי נחוצים הם לי

"Bring with you the [secret] known writings, from our holy teacher, whose soul is in Eden, because they are urgent to me" (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 183, 1975:343,).³⁹⁰

3) Letter from the Baal Shem Tov to his student, R. David Lakes requesting he send the 'unspecified letters' which are known to the latter:

שכחתי בהתבה בביתי פאטשיילע עם מכתבים נ[ה]חוצים לי[.]. אבקש תכף להביאם
או לשלחם אלי כי בתוכם יש גם מכתבים הידועים

"I left behind, enclosed within a cloth in the box in my house, letters which are very important to me. I request you to bring them or send them, to me immediately – for in them are included the [unspecified] letters known to you..." (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 20, 1975:344).³⁹¹

4) Letter from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Nachum telling him not to touch the letters from the former's teacher, R. Adam Baal Shem, as they are private:

אמנם כן הצדק אתו אבל כל החפצים שנמצאו ת"י עכ"פ בל יגלה אותם עד אשר
אבוא בעצמי כי יש בתוכם כתבים יקרים מהקדוש האלוקי ר' אדם בע"ש אשר ע"פ
דתה"ק הם שייכים אלי לבדי וד"ל

"Although you are [technically] correct, and all the objects found in your possession [are yours], however, do not touch [the letters included amongst the other objects] until I personally come (to you).

³⁸⁹ Henceforward I do not reproduce the entire letter but, in the interests of brevity, only relevant excerpts from the various letters.

³⁹⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

³⁹¹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

For amongst them are precious letters from the holy and godly R. Adam Baal Shem and according to the law of our holy Torah, they belong solely to me. Enough said” (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 255, 1975:344-5).³⁹²

5) Letter from the Baal Shem Tov to his brother-in-law, R. Gershon Kitover, asking for the many manuscripts which the latter had confiscated from him while the former was in hiding:³⁹³

בטח זוכר כ”ה עוד בהיותי טמור ונעלם לקח מאתי כתבי יד הרבה באמרו אלי בזה”ל
וואש קערשתי זיך אן מיט דעם אבל כעת נחוץ לי לדעת מענין אחד נכבד מדובר
בו...ע”כ יאבה נא כת”ר נא ונא לשלוח לי גוף הכתב או עב”פ להעתיק ולשלוח אלי

“Surely you remember, honourable rabbi [Gershon Kitover], that when I was still in hiding, you took many handwritten manuscripts [away from me] saying, and I quote: ‘What are you doing with these?’

However, right now it is important for me [to have them back]... because honourable matters are written in them...Therefore, please be willing, honourable one, to please, please, send back [to me] the original writings, or at least copy them [for me] and send them [back] to me...” (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 139, 1975:340).³⁹⁴

6) Ultimatum sent by R. Adam Baal Shem Tov to the Baal Shem Tov binding him by oath to reveal himself as the leader or to burn the ‘teachings’ he sent him:

משביע אני אותך אם בל תתגלה בשנה הבע”ל תשרוף כל הכתבים שבאו לידך הק’
ממני

“I am binding you with an oath, that if you do not reveal yourself within the forthcoming year – may it descend upon us for good – you will burn all the writings which came into your holy hands from me” (R.

³⁹² Translation and square brackets are mine.

³⁹³ This is a reference to the tradition that the Baal Shem Tov spent the first thirty-six years of his life in ‘hiding’ as a ‘hidden *Tzadik*,’ before he ‘revealed himself’ to the world (See Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 104, 1975:23).

³⁹⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Document 56, 1975:337).³⁹⁵

4.8.1 Synthesis

Leaving aside the question of the authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza* for a moment, we can still draw some useful conclusions from excerpts of the letters brought above. In the first letter, it is hard to know whether the “*well-known*” yet anonymous rabbi is meant to allude to Shabbatai Tzvi, R. Adam Baal Shem, or R. Heshil Tzoref (or a conflation of all of them). Yet, even if these letters are fraudulent, they may well represent the popular perception of the existence of secret written material emanating from an unnamed “*well-known rabbi*,” that had to be hidden away. Based on the testimony that the Baal Shem Tov specifically possessed the autographic copy (Liebes (2007:15) of *Sefer haTzoref*, there must have been an established common knowledge – that even a forger would have drawn from – that secret writings existed, which due to their *Sabbatian* content, had to be hidden away. Thus, no matter their provenance, these letters, may serve as popular testimony to that tradition.

Another conclusion to be drawn from the popular perception of the existence of some form of ‘secret writings,’ is that they seem out of context at a time when there were no longer supposed to be ‘secret writings.’ The *Mishna* and *Talmud* had long since been written down and they were no longer an oral tradition. Even *Zoharic* and *Lurianic Kabbalah* were open documents because mysticism was no longer secret. The only writings at the time of the Baal Shem Tov that could be considered ‘secret’ were banned and outlawed *Sabbatian* literature.

We now turn to chapter five where I deal with the question of the authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza* as an exemplar, to examine the important question of whether or not authorised *Chassidic* sources – even, as we shall see, those endorsed by three generations of *Rebbes* – can confidently be used as reliable, accurate and historiographical accounts of their own history.

³⁹⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

CHAPTER 5

SOME INTERNAL CHASSIDIC ACCOUNTS OF ITS (PRE)HISTORY AND R. NACHMAN OF BRESLOV'S ATTEMPT TO 'FIX' SABBATIANISM

5.1 Introduction

Anecdotal evidence indicates that one of the criticisms often levelled at researchers of the history of *Chassidism* is that investigators make judicious use of 'external' historical sources that are foreign to the internal accounts and traditions of the *Chassidim* themselves. In an attempt to respond to that criticism, it must be pointed out that mysticism in general and by its nature, places more emphasis on personal experientialism than on the need to create an accurate historical public record:

"It was more important to live mysticism, not simply to know it"
(Heschel 1974:75).³⁹⁶

In the writings of *Lurianic Kabbalah* – and by extension, later *Chassidic* writings – whenever the expression כידוע ('as is well-known') is used regarding a certain notion, it counterintuitively denotes the exact opposite, indicating an absolute lack of clarity as to who or what precipitated concept in the first instance (Havlin 2010:503). Yet, the lack of accuracy does not impede the mystical process in the least. On the contrary, the mystery seems to enhance the mystical experience for the mystic, and even becomes the 'history.' Sometimes this history is presented as:

שמועות פורחות באויר... שאיש אינו יודע מי עומד מאחריהם, ואיש אינו אחראי
אפילו למסירתן

"rumours floating in the air [which have no basis in fact] and no one
knows [which personality] stands behind them, nor is there even any

³⁹⁶ Heschel was probably referring more to knowing the technical theosophy than to knowing its history, but I would suggest a *fortiori*, that knowledge of history could be included.

culpability for the [further] transmission of these ideas” (Havlin 2101:503).³⁹⁷

The following section, however, deals with some representations of *Chassidic* history which are, in the first instance, presented as *factful history* and not as *hagiography*. We examine the historicity of the more ‘extreme’ case of the *Kherson Geniza* as well as the more ‘moderate’ example of *Shivchei haBesht*. I will focus on the former, but also refer to the latter.

5.2 *Kherson Geniza* as a test case for the historicity of internal *Chassidic* sources

5.2.1 Introduction

This study must devote space to the *Kherson Geniza* because three generations of influential *Chassidic Rebbes* steadfastly promoted and defended its historicity and authenticity. However, the *Kherson Geniza* is overwhelmingly considered by scholars to be a forgery. Understanding this tension is critical because it exposes how difficult it is to rely on *Chassidic* accounts of historical events; and demonstrates how easy it is for those same sources to rule out anything resembling *Sabbatian* influences on the movement. The *Kherson Geniza* – and its close relationship to the *Chassidic* hagiographical biography of the Baal Shem Tov as portrayed in *Shivchei haBesht* – are examined here in detail because they can be viewed as test cases, demonstrating that large segments of *Chassidic* literature were not averse to a tendentious and revisionist reconstruction of their own history.³⁹⁸ This, I suggest, took place both within the *Kherson Geniza* and, to a lesser degree, within *Shivchei haBesht*.

Firstly, I *show* that in the *Kherson Geniza* this recasting and adjustment of early *Chassidic* history intentionally favoured the narrative of a particular sect of *Chassidim*, namely the *Chabad* dynasty.³⁹⁹ Secondly, I *argue* that both the *Kherson Geniza* and

³⁹⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine.

³⁹⁸ Overall, the letters in the *Kherson Geniza* seem determined to portray and ‘confirm’ the storyline as presented in *Shivchei haBesht*: “From the point of view of the modern forgers [of the *Kherson Geniza*] ...the tales [in *Shivchei haBesht*] represented the [actual] history of Hasidism...and it was this that they were proposing to reinforce with documentation” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:130 n.58). Square brackets are mine.

³⁹⁹ As a general observation, *Shivchei haBesht* is buttressed and completed by the ‘documentary evidence’ produced in the *Kherson Geniza* which, additionally, also promotes the *Chabad* narrative (Meir 2023-).

Shivchei haBesht went to great, if not strained, effort to emphasise *Chassidism's* unambiguous and unquestionable opposition to, and abhorrence for, *Sabbatianism*. A brief expansion of these two points follow:

1) Firstly, the *Kherson Geniza* provides a collection of personal letters, allegedly exchanged between the primary characters involved in the early *Chassidic* period, which serve as written 'testimonies' to support the hagiographical narratives of *Chabad*. The letters in the *Kherson Geniza* advance the notion that R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), the first *Chabad Rebbe*, was indeed:

"the most authentic heir of the original Hasidism of the founders"

(Rapoport-Albert 1988:137).

The *Kherson Geniza* also generally follows the chronicles of *Shivchei haBesht* which was published by a student of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi in 1814 (see section 4.7.4).⁴⁰⁰

A more detailed examination of the writing style of the *Kherson Geniza* will follow in the next section (5.2.3), but I want to show some examples here of a latent bias toward *Chabad*. There is a distinct anomaly in the writing style of the letters of the *Kherson Geniza* which is evident in the opening and closing segments of these communications. Lineage, pedigree and relationships such as signing off a letter with expressions like רבך ומורדך (*from your rabbi and teacher*); חברי ובן גילי (*my friend and colleague*); תלמידי (*my student*), are blaringly overemphasised compared to other letters, outside of the *Kherson Geniza* collection, that we know are genuine. These personalised expressions subliminally demonstrate authoritative and intimate lines of transmission that are intended to lead directly to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi and *Chabad*.

⁴⁰⁰ It must be noted, however, that Rapoport-Albert (1988:138) does not accept that *Shivchei haBesht* promotes the *Chabad* narrative because "it is difficult to discern a particular HaBaD [*Chabad*] bias in the *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* [*Shivchei haBesht*]...even though the printer of the first edition was a follower of the leader of the HaBaD school, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady." Square brackets are mine. I tend to agree with Rapoport-Albert because I did not find any references at all to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi in *Shivchei haBesht*. However, as mentioned earlier, the early sections of *Shivchei haBesht* deal with R. Adam Baal Shem as real personality – a position held by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (see footnote 367). In any case, Rapoport-Albert (1988:137) agrees that the *Kherson Geniza* (as opposed to *Shivchei haBesht*) does clearly "reflect a peculiarly HaBaD perspective on the early history of Hasidism."

As another example, the letters from the *Magid of Mezeritch* (the successor to the Baal Shem Tov) refer to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi by the *sobriquet* זלמינא (*Zalmina*) implying a great sense of familiarity with the future leader of the *Chabad* movement. This, again, creates the impression of an intimate and hegemonous link in the line of transmission from the Baal Shem Tov, through the *Magid of Mezeritch* to *Chabad*. However, “*Zalmina*” was a nickname commonly used in regions of Ukraine, but not in Lithuania and Russia where R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi would have been active (Hilman 1953:242).⁴⁰¹

2) Secondly, the *Kherson Geniza* together with its ‘parent’ or ‘source’ literature, *Shivchei haBesht*, unequivocally dispel the question of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement. *Shivchei haBesht* emphasises on numerous occasions how opposed the Baal Shem Tov was to *Sabbatianism*:

a) This opposition to *Sabbatianism* was so strong that the Baal Shem Tov’s health was said to have been severely threatened:

“[I]t was decreed that the Besht would soon pass away because of his fight against the sect of Shabbetai Tsevi” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:255).

b) The Baal Shem Tov’s opposition to the *Sabbatian* work *Chemdat Yamim* (see section 4.6) is particularly emphasised. The Baal Shem Tov predicts its publication and says that the problem is that the author was:

“a member of the sect of Shabbetai Tsevi...[but] [t]he style will be attractive and it will lure many people” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:85-6).

c) There is the story of the Baal Shem Tov trying to provide a *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) for Shabbatai Tzvi, but during the former’s sleep:

“Shabbetai Tsevi, may his name be blotted out, came and attempted to tempt him...” (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86-7).

⁴⁰¹ Other nicknames, like אברהמיני, זושע, and בעריניא (*Avremina, Zusha, Berenya*) are commonly used throughout the *Kherson Geniza*, although Hilman (1953:242) points out that in reality, based on authenticated correspondence, the *Rebbs* generally addressed their interlocutors by their formal names only.

d) However, sometimes veiled *Sabbatian* references may have slipped in, such as the story of the ‘second coming’ of the Baal Shem Tov, sixty years after his passing – perhaps paralleling the similar legend concerning Shabbatai Tzvi, also believed to return after sixty years of his passing (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:xxvi, and 169-70).

Both the *Kherson Geniza*⁴⁰² and *Shivchei haBesht* took pains to dispel any connections to *Sabbatianism*. In the following section, I argue that the *Kherson Geniza* was not just a *forgery*, but a *tendentious forgery*.⁴⁰³ This makes a stronger case supporting the notion that *Sabbatian* influences could have easily been suppressed in various internal layers of ‘official’ *Chassidic* testimonies, records and certainly hagiographies.

5.2.2 Background to the *Kherson Geniza*

In 1918, during the Russian Revolution, rumours began to spread about the origins and status of a large collection of *Chassidic* letters – allegedly exchanged between the Baal Shem Tov, his students and his students’ students – that was found in Kherson (Southern Ukraine), an area not generally known for its *Chassidim*. A newspaper in Cracow reported that these letters were from the private collection of the *Chassidic Rebbe*, R. Yisrael of Ruzhin (1796-1850) whose ancestry went directly back to the *Magid of Mezeritch*. R. Yisrael of Ruzhin was arrested on a charge of murder in Kiev in 1838.⁴⁰⁴ His belongings and writings were confiscated by the Russian police as he had no money for bail. When he was eventually released – or, perhaps, after he escaped – the documents remained in the custody of the police.⁴⁰⁵ These documents were later moved from the archive in Kiev⁴⁰⁶ to other archives, eventually making their

⁴⁰² I deal with anti-*Sabbatian* references in the *Kherson Geniza* towards the end of section 5.2.3.

⁴⁰³ It is relatively easy to show how the *Kherson Geniza* may have been a simple forgery undertaken for financial gain, but, as we shall see at the beginning of section 5.2.3, the letters may have been somewhat ‘polished’ after they were acquired by the court of *Chabad* (Meir 2023-). See also footnote 412.

⁴⁰⁴ This event somehow related to the Jewish laws concerning a *Moser* (*informer*) that ran afoul of the civil laws of the state (Havlin 2010:505).

⁴⁰⁵ According to Havlin (2010:505) there is no evidence of R. Yisrael of Ruzhin possessing any unusual documents or of the authorities confiscating any of his documents or possessions.

⁴⁰⁶ Eliyahu Galant, who worked at the Kiev Archive for many years, testified that no such collection of *Chassidic* letters was ever held there (Havlin 2010:506).

way to Kherson in 1918 (Meir 2023-). There, the collection was either sold by, or stolen from, the Kherson archives of the secret police, and then made its way to Odessa where sections of it were sold for large sums of money. The sellers refused to reveal how they attained the letters, but they were all stamped with the official seal (*gushpanka*) of the government, individually numbered, and signed by an official (Schneerson, *haTamim*, 1975:11).

With this exceptional new find, it was expected that the letters would finally serve as documentary evidence concerning the early less-documented period of the *Chassidic* movement. There were three distinct groups of people extremely interested in these personal letters purportedly written by the major protagonists of the *Chassidic* movement:

1) The first group comprised the mainstream *Chassidic* courts. Needless to say, these documents, thought to have once been in the possession of R. Yisrael of Ruzhin, garnered the attention of many *Chassidic Rebbes*. These included the family of Ruzhin and the *Chassidim* of *Husiatyn* who put forward claims for this collection of letters. Additionally, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson from *Chabad*, also expressed particular interest in this collection. He was not yet a *Rebbe* because his father R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson (known as the *Rebbe Rashab*) – the fifth *Chabad Rebbe*⁴⁰⁷ – only passed away in 1920, a year and a half after the manuscripts were discovered in 1918.

2) The second group interested in this collection of letters was the emergent ‘*Beshtian*’ *Chassidim*.⁴⁰⁸ Besides the mainstream and traditional *Chassidic* courts, there was a breakaway movement of *Chassidim* that also claimed ownership of the Baal Shem Tov. These were *Chassidic* believers, particularly active between the two world wars, who did *not* want to be led by dynastic lines of *Rebbes*. They left their respective traditional *Chassidic* courts and adopted the earlier model of the Baal Shem Tov and his circle. They wanted to experience the ‘original’ form of *Chassidism* which they called ‘*Beshtian*’

⁴⁰⁷ The *Chabad* dynasty had seven Rebbes: 1) Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the ‘*Alter Rebbe*’ (1745-1812); 2) Rabbi Dovber, the ‘*Mitteler Rebbe*’ (1773-1827); 3) R. Menachem Mendel, the ‘*Tzemach Tzedek*’ (1789-1866); 4) R. Shmuel, the ‘*Rebbe Maharash*’ (1834-1882); 5) R. Sholom Dovber, the ‘*Rebbe Rashab*’ (1860-1920); 6) R. Joseph Isaac Schneerson, the ‘*Rebbe Rayatz*’ (1880-1950); and 7) R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the ‘*Rebbe*’ (1902-1994).

⁴⁰⁸ Literally “*Chassidim of the Baal Shem Tov*.”

Chassidism. In this spirit, the new ‘*Beshtian*’ *Chassidim* began to publish books about the Baal Shem Tov and his ways, which, in their view, had soon become corrupted by the officialdom of *Chassidic* courts under the hegemony of the various *Rebbes*. In a similar vein, although many decades earlier, the *Kotzker Rebbe* (1787-1859) had already begun protesting what he considered to be the tyranny and corruption of the *Rebbes* (Heschel 1974:9).

3) The third group of interested individuals comprised modern and secular Jewish writers and thinkers. They too, were extremely keen to see what was promoted as the original letters of the Baal Shem Tov. Martin Buber (1878-1965) described how the Baal Shem Tov was a great reformer of the Jewish world; how he came to do battle with the fossilised rabbinic establishment and its laws; and how he tried to restore the Jews to an intimate relationship with the Divine and return them to their connection with nature. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, he believed that although “*Hasidism is in a state of decay*”, Judaism in general was invigorated by the innovations of the Baal Shem Tov (Buber 2002:xii).⁴⁰⁹ These often-secular romantic notions surrounding the Baal Shem Tov were very common during this period, and they paralleled many sentiments of the religious model of ‘*Beshtian*’ *Chassidism*. Numerous other authors like Micha Josef Berdichevsky (1865-1921) (bin Gorion 1990:202),⁴¹⁰ Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942) who “*tended toward a certain romanticization of Hasidism*” (Green and Mayse 2016:2) and Shmuel Aba Horodezky (1871-1957) (Horodezsky 1928:5) also wrote about the Baal Shem Tov. All these writers saw the Baal Shem Tov as a radical religious reformer who was only to be ‘mainstreamed’ by subsequent generations of *Chassidic Rebbes* who, as it were, reigned him in (Meir 2023-).

This means that the idea of the Baal Shem Tov did not just belong to the camp of traditional *Chassidism* or even to ‘*Beshtian*’ *Chassidism*, but to all people including secular modern writers. Against this backdrop, one begins to understand the tremendous excitement that swept across all segments of the Jewish world, when

⁴⁰⁹ Buber could not have written that sentence in the twenty-first century where we see an unprecedented growth of multiple popular forms and sects of *Chassidism* (Liebes 2011:1). Nevertheless, Buber (2002:xiii) was trying to emphasise the notion that “*No renewal of Judaism is possible that does not bear in itself the elements of Hasidism.*”

⁴¹⁰ Berdichevsky changed his surname to bin Gorion.

rumours circulated that genuine writings of the Baal Shem Tov had been discovered. So many interested parties wanted to know just what was hidden in this extraordinary find.

A certain *Husiatyn Chassid* who lived close to Kherson, by the name of Naftali Tzvi Shapira, a poor and itinerant bookseller, obtained fragments of this collection which became known as the *Kherson Geniza*, and began selling them. On one knew anything about their origins nor could they vouch for their authenticity (Havlin 2010:504). One text made its way to the writer and poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934) who was living in Odessa. He published it and declared it to be a wonderful find. But he also noted that there was something suspicious about this text as if it had been touched by foreign hands (Meir 2023-). An early buyer of Naftali Tzvi Shapira's letters was the wealthy R. Yosef Burnstein, but when he noticed that the letters began to 'multiply' as he bought them, he became suspicious and refrained from further purchases (Havlin 2010:520).

5.2.3 Chabad's relationship to the *Kherson Geniza*

News of the letters of the *Kherson Geniza* soon spread. A wealthy *Chabad Chasid*, Shmuel Gourarie of Kermanchug, decided to purchase the entire collection of letters and gift some of them to his *Rebbe*, R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson, and to make copies of other letters to send to the family of R. Yisrael of Ruzhin. According to Abraham Kahana, Shmuel Gourarie had paid close to ten thousand rubles for the letters. After Abraham Kahana informed Shmuel Gourarie that the letters were, in his opinion, forgeries, the latter almost lost his mind (Hilman 1955:539).

In the meantime, some tens of letters reached the *Chassidim* of Ruzhin, and in 1920 they began to publish these new findings in a series of booklets. However, from the language of the texts published by the *Ruzhiner Chassidim*, it soon became evident that although, superficially, they appeared to be relatively credible, they were anachronistic. This anomaly aroused some suspicion that the letters may have been forged (Meir 2023-).

The story takes on a significant turn. When the letters that were gifted to *Chabad* – and there were many hundreds of texts – were eventually publicised, they appeared to be much more 'polished' in terms of grammar and were more time-appropriate. They still aroused suspicion, but not to the extent as the earlier *Ruzhiner*

texts. This was surprising because both sets of texts had allegedly come from the *same source*. It appeared as though the *Chabad* texts had been ‘improved’ in the interim (Meir 2023-). If this was the case, the letters may have been forged twice, or forged once and then enhanced again.⁴¹¹

The letters appear to have been ‘corrected’ and ‘enhanced’ while in the custody of *Chabad*, considering the more ‘polished’ version of their letters. Referring to the letters of the *Kherson Geniza*, Maya Balakirsky Katz is convinced that the:

“[Chabad] Hasidic leader R. Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn (1880–1950) falsified documents...to retroactively create authoritative source material for early Hasidism” (Balakirsky Katz 2019:179).⁴¹²

This might explain why the collection in the hands of *Chabad* appeared more ‘accurate’ compared to the earlier and smaller collection acquired by the *Ruzhiner Chassidim*.

Naftali Tzvi, also known as Hershele Shapira emerges as a strong candidate for the primary forger, although he may have had assistance from others. According to the testimony of R. Levi Grossman, Naftali Tzvi Shapira was well disposed to the art of forgery (Havlin 2010:510). Similarly, Abraham Kahana testified that Naftali Tzvi Shapira – who regularly begged from him – once offered to sell him an alleged letter from the Baal Shem Tov. It was clearly a bad forgery with new ink that had bled out to the other side of the paper that was badly and artificially aged. Abraham Kahana did not buy the letter, but for some reason, he copied the text. Later, Abraham Kahana also viewed the letters that R. Shmuel Gourarie had acquired in order to gift them to R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson and immediately recognised that they emerged from the same hand of Naftali Tzvi Shapira as their presentation and writing style perfectly matched that of the original letter Shapira had offered him (Hilman 1955:538-9). Havlin

⁴¹¹ There is no evidence that these letters even came from Kherson or *if there even were enough documents to be called a ‘Geniza.’* According to accounts by Hillel Zeitlin and Meir Balaban, the letters were found in St Petersburg after being thrown out into the street. The collection has alternately also been called the ‘*Kiev Geniza*’ and the ‘*Kharkov Geniza*’ (Havlin 2010:504). This notion that the original ‘find’ may have been far more limited in number than the hundreds of letters allegedly belonging to the collection, supports the possibility that the collection may have somehow been ‘polished,’ enhanced (Meir 2023-) or even enlarged.

⁴¹² Square brackets are mine.

(2010:518, footnote 36) records a testimony that Naftali Tzvi Shapira was an alcoholic and needed to engage in forgery to accrue funds to sustain his habit.⁴¹³

Naftali Tzvi Shapira, came from solid *Chassidic* stock. His father, R. Yisrael Shapira was a respected rabbi in Makarov and he often complained that his son used to perform ‘pranks’ such as forgeries even before the controversy over the *Kherson Geniza* began. On both his father and mother’s side, there was a lineage of important Rabbis, *Chassidic* authors and collectors of *Chassidic* stories. It is, therefore, quite feasible that he would have been intimately familiar with *Chassidic* lore, stories and tradition which he may then have projected into his letters (Hilman 1955:540).

Yet, as we shall see, three generations of *Chabad Rebbe*s were insistent that the *Kherson* letters were authentic. Between 1935 and 1938, while living in Warsaw, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, published over three hundred letters in his journal entitled *haTamim*. They were presented as authentic letters. In 1940, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson arrived in America. Forty years later, in 1980, a meeting of rabbinic philologists took place under the auspices of R. Chaim Lieberman (Katzman 2010:570, footnote 8), who had previously been the secretary and librarian to R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson who passed away in 1950. R. Chaim Lieberman was one of the:

“outstanding bibliographers of his time, and even published material on the condition of anonymity” (Havlin 2010:418).

The attendees were cautioned not to bring up the sensitive issue of the *Kherson Geniza*. One of the participants misunderstood and raised the matter with R. Chaim Lieberman who immediately responded that he knew the forger well. R. Chaim Lieberman mentioned that the forger was very poor and that he had forged the letters because he needed money. The participants were aghast and asked how, then, could the *Rebbe*, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson have published those very letters and presented them as part of authentic *Chassidic* literature (דברי אלקים חיים),⁴¹⁴ and how could R. Chaim Lieberman accept that? R. Chaim Lieberman explained:

⁴¹³ Havlin heard this account in an oral communication with R. Eliezer Katzman who was a close associate of R. Chaim Lieberman, the librarian of R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson.

⁴¹⁴ In the *Chassidic* tradition of *Chabad*, דא"ח, (*D"a"ch*) is an abbreviation for דברי אלקים חיים (*words of the living God*) and refers specifically to *Chassidut* (the study of mystical *Chassidic* literature).

המהרהר אחר רבו כמהרהר אחר השכינה, אין לי שום שאלה על הרבי בנושא זה,
אמנם יודע אני שהמכתבים מזויפים, והכרתי אישית את הזיידן, אך מה אני ומה אני
זבוב קצוץ כנפים, להשיג ולהכיר למה עשה הרבי כך, ומדוע אמר כך

“One who questions his teacher is like one who questions the Shechina. I have no questions for my Rebbe [Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson] on this matter. However, I know that in truth these letters are forged, and I personally knew the forger, but who am I? I am like an insect whose wings have been severed when it comes to trying to understand why the Rebbe did this, and why he said that” (Havlin 2010:519; Rosenboim [ed.]1995:139).⁴¹⁵

Earlier, in 1922, Avraham Schwadron (1878-1957), one of the founders of the Israel National Library in Jerusalem, sent samples of the fibres of the material on which the letters were written, to Vienna for testing. The results showed that they could not have been written before 1846. The sample was from an original-looking letter from the Baal Shem Tov which contained his iconic and ‘original’ signature (Havlin 2010:509).⁴¹⁶ R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson responded to Avraham Schwadron six years later, in 1928, through his secretary, R. Yechezkel Feigin, that the letters were not autographs, but copies of the ‘originals’:

כי כל המכתבים האלה הבאים מהגניזה אינם אלא העתקות...ובדבר גוף ועצם
הענינים האמורים בהגליונות יש להם יסוד גדול בקבלה

“All these letters that come from the Geniza are copies [of the originals] ...The body and substance of the contents of the writings, [however,] are all well-established in Kabbalah” (Feigin, *Igrot Kodesh, Admor haZaken*, 2012:439).⁴¹⁷

In other words, according to R. Yechezkel Feigin, the Kherson letters were *copies* of the originals, but their underlying authenticity is vouchsafed by their deep and technical mystical content. However, Hilman (1955:535) points out that – besides the letters – the official inscriptions in Russian, allegedly by the police archivists who confiscated

⁴¹⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴¹⁶ This letter was acquired by Simcha Assaf directly from the bookseller Naftali Tzvi Shapira of Odessa, and is now held at the National Library of Israel (Havlin 2010:509).

⁴¹⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine. This letter is also published in Schwadron (1929:9-10) and Havlin (2010:507).

the collection of letters in 1838, were also written on modern paper that was only produced after 1846,⁴¹⁸ which was eight years after the incarceration of R. Yisrael of Ruzhin.

In any case, directly challenging this claim that the letters were copies, is the testimony of those who first brought the letters to the various printing houses. According to Havlin (2010:524), the letters were not presented as copies, but as original and genuine letters with the straps and bindings still in place. If this is correct, it severely undermines the above-quoted statement of R. Yechezkel Feigin writing on behalf of R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, claiming that all the letters were copies (Havlin 2010:524).

Hilman also responds to the claim that the letters were copies:

כל אלו שראו את אגרות הגניזה מעידים, כי היה להן מראה של אגרות מקוריות

“All those who saw the letters of the Geniza have testified that they had the appearance of original letters” (Hilman 1955:534).⁴¹⁹

Hilman insists that the letters had the distinct appearance of being old and worn. The covers of the letters had four folds, two glued sides, and a torn section – made to resemble typical envelopes, with the addresses written on the outside. According to these accounts, the letters were certainly not presented as copies, but rather as the original letters. Nevertheless, R. Yechezkel Feigin (*Igrot Kodesh, Admor haZaken*, 2012:439) insists that although the letters were all copies, they still reflected authenticity in the “*body and substance*” of the textual material, and concerning this “*there is no doubt whatsoever*” (ואין ספק כלל וכלל).

Havlin expresses his astonishment over this insistence from the court of *Chabad* that the letters were copies:

ממילא תמוה ביותר שמבראשית ההתרחשות הזו...הציגו ומציגים מכתבים שמקורם
באסופה זו כמקוריים. ביותר תמוה...חותמו של הבעש"ט

⁴¹⁸ Hilman (1955:535) stresses that although modern paper technically first appeared from 1846, it was only from around 1849 that such paper was produced in earnest; and Russia lagged behind Eastern Europe in terms of technical advancements and continued for some time to produce paper from cloth. R. Yisrael of Ruzhin passed away in 1850.

⁴¹⁹ Translation is mine.

“It is most astonishing that from the beginning of the [Kherson Geniza] episode, the letters in this collection were, and are still, depicted as being original. Especially astonishing is...the [alleged] signature of the Baal Shem Tov” (Havlin 2010:508).⁴²⁰

Despite these objections, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson doubled down and began to promote the *Kherson Geniza* even more. He went so far as to turn them into primary sources for actual *Chassidic* historiography (Meir 2023-). There are even accounts that *Chabad* emissaries were sent to Russia to search for the original letters. According to these accounts, the autographs were found and subsequently taken to the *Chabad* Library in New York. Havlin (2010:519), however, based on his communications with the *Chabad* Library, confirms these accounts to be spurious.

One also wonders why – if the letters were indeed genuine – were they not simply returned to the family of Ruzhin in whose possession they were said to have originated. R. Yisrael of Ruzhin lived unharassed and peacefully after his escape, as did his descendants after his passing in 1850; and his family’s literary collections remained intact until well into the twentieth century. If what became known as the *Kherson Genizah* was originally in their possession, why did the family not rightfully claim these esteemed letters back? (Hilman 1955:535).

According to eyewitness testimony directly to R. David Tzvi Hilman – from the emissary⁴²¹ who had physically transferred the collection of letters from Shmuel Gourarie to R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson – the letters were:

נקנו בעד הון תועפות בתור מקורית...כן שמעתי מכמה אנשים שהיו באודיסא
באותה תקופה...וכן כתב הרב פרופ' ר"ש אסף...שקנה בעצמו כמה אגרות אצל
המו"ס שפירא (הוא הזיין דגן...)

“acquired for a large sum of money [specifically because] they were presented as being original...This is something I heard from many people who were in Odessa during that period...And Professor Rabbi Simcha Assaf ...who bought several letters from the bookseller

⁴²⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴²¹ According to Havlin, Hilman informed him that this emissary was R. Chaim Yosef Rosenblum (Editorial note by Havlin inserted in brackets in Hilman 1955:534).

[Naftali Tzvi] Shapira (the forger...), also wrote [that the letters were presented as original]" (Hilman 1955:534).⁴²²

Besides these accounts of Hilman, even the internal writings of R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson published in *haTamim* confirm that the letters were indeed presented as original writings. This makes his secretary, R. Yechezkel Feigin's claim – in 1928 – that the letters were not autographs, but copies of the 'originals,' very difficult to comprehend. R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson confirms that the letters were presented as originals:

בשום אופן לא חפצו המוכרים לגלות באיזה דרך הגיעו אליהם הכתבי יד והספרים,
ומראה פניהם העיר חשד של זיוף, אבל מכיון שראו – הקונים – כי כל כתב, מכתב
וספר, כתוב עליו כי נמצא בעת החיפוש שה' בביתו של הצדיק מרוזין וחתום
בגושפנקא דמלכא בשעוה ומצוין במספר – נומער – עם חתימתו של הפקיד, התחילו
לקנות במחירים גבוהים

"Under no circumstances would the sellers reveal how the original writings and books came into their possession. On the surface, they [the letters] were suspected of being forgeries. However, once the buyers saw that each document, [including] the letters and the books, were labelled during the court case as stemming from the house of the Tzadik [R. Yisrael] of Ruzhin, and sealed with the wax stamp of the government, and identified by a number, with the signature of the [court] officer, they began to purchase [the items] for large sums of money" (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:11).⁴²³

There is clearly some considerable confusion as to whether the letters were first presented as copies or autographs. Testimony exists that R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson examined the letters. He detected a foreign element in the letters, but generally accepted their authenticity while aware that they were copies and not the original letters. R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson is recorded (in a letter by his son, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson) as saying:

"all the writings and letters are only copies of the original autographs but their contents are authentic. Even if they should be found to

⁴²² Translation and square brackets are mine. Round brackets are Hilman's.

⁴²³ Translation and square brackets are mine.

contradict some points of fact, this is insignificant in relation to their remarkable contents, and must be the result of errors by the copyists" (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:11-12).⁴²⁴

Although the early buyers and researchers were initially blinded by the overwhelming officialdom of wax government stamps, document numbers, and signatures of police officials, it soon became evident that this was perhaps the greatest forgery in the history of *Chassidism*. Jonatan Meir (2023-) believes this to be an example of one of the most unprofessional attempts at textual fraud ever because hardly a single letter is perfectly accurate in terms of dates, and characters. According to R. David Tzvi Hilman, who had worked with and published original and genuine letters of the early *Chassidic Rebbes*, the *Kherson Geniza* was an outright forgery:

הזייפן לא הצליח במלאכתו, עד שרובם של המכתבים הם מזוייפים מתוכם

"The forger [not only] did not succeed in his technical forging work, but [as is evident in] most of the letters, even the very content was false" (Hilman 1953:240).⁴²⁵

Some individuals who had passed away and were separated by a hundred years are depicted as writing to each other. In one instance R. David Tzvi Hilman derisively writes:

הזייפן מחיה מתים

"the forger has brought the individual back to life again" (Hilman 1953:270).⁴²⁶

The letters often associate the individuals with the names of the places from whence they hailed or served. For example, R. Yakov Yosef haCohen is referred to as R. Yakov Yosef of Polonnoye. The problem is that he was only appointed as the rabbi in Polonnoye after 1770 when the previous rabbi, R. Leib Mochiach passed away. Yet, the letters refer to him as R. Yakov Yosef of *Polonnoye* even before that date. In the

⁴²⁴ Translation is by Rapoport-Albert (1988:138). It is extracted from the same letter by R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, mentioned above, in support of the authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza*.

⁴²⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴²⁶ Translation is mine. This is particularly the case regarding less well-known individuals whose death dates were more obscure, such as R. *Zusha* of Anipoli (Hilman 1955:533).

letters printed in *haTamim*, this mistake and anachronism is replicated eighteen times (Hilman 1955:533).

Meir (2023-) insists that any historian would immediately recognise that the texts are fraudulent. Ada Rapoport-Albert claims that:

“[T]he documents are likely to have been produced not long before their discovery [in 1918]” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:130).⁴²⁷

According to Meir Balaban (1935:320), the letters in the *Kherson Geniza* are זיופים גלויים (*open forgeries*) and were produced just after 1914.

In 1931, the historian, Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) published a book on the history of the *Chassidic* movement. He showed that the *Kherson Geniza* letters were indeed fake. The interesting thing is that Dubnow and other historians had not been able to see the entire collection of letters except for a few fragments. The bulk of the letters were held by the *Chassidim*, because when Dubnow published his book in 1931, *Chabad* had not yet published the letters in *haTamim*. Nevertheless, Dubnow was able to make his determination on just a few samples from the collection. A collection of selected Kherson letters, however, was published as early as 1924 in New York, entitled *Sefer Chachmei Yisrael Baal Shem Tov* (Kramer 1924:3).⁴²⁸

Meir maintains that, notwithstanding their fraudulent nature, the collection of letters is most engaging and impressive. There is no question that the first forger wanted remuneration and worked on the assumption that *Chassidic* courts like *Ruzhin* and *Chabad* would pay large sums of money for these letters. There is also no question that the original forger was exceptionally creative. He had extensive albeit sometimes distorted knowledge of the period. However, he knew exactly which types of texts and ideas would be most sought-after and desired by *Chassidim* – and he produced results that corresponded to those needs (Meir 2023-).

The story takes on another significant and surprising turn. Years later, in 1954, the seventh and last *Chabad Rebbe*, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, produced a letter supporting the absolute authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza*. He acknowledged

⁴²⁷ Square brackets are mine.

⁴²⁸ This book is available at the online source: <https://hebrewbooks.org/3122>. Retrieved on 07 February 2024.

some of the discrepancies that we have pointed out, but uses them as arguments in favour of their legitimacy:

מזייף הרוצה לזייף ולמכור אח"ך את המכתבים לאחד מבתי האדמו"רים, היינו לאלו שיש להם ידיעה בקורות ימי החסידות ותורתה הרי בודאי ידייק ויגיה כמה פעמים, כיון שיחשוש שאים ימצאו טעויות כאלו יגלה קלונו ברבים ויפסיד את כל העסק שלו. ולכן מציאות הטעויות הנ"ל (לאחר שננכה מהם הטעויות שנתוספו ע"ד הבחור הזעזער של "התמים") הן אדרבה הוכחה שהמכ' לא נכתבו ע"י מזייף

"A forger, however, who would want to sell the writing to a Chassidic court where they have knowledge of Chassidic history, would have made the effort to ensure there were no mistakes as this would reveal the fact that the writing was a forgery. So, the existence of mistakes (after dismissing the additional mistakes incurred by the youth who acted as the typesetter) actually proves their authenticity" (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:249-251).⁴²⁹

In an earlier letter, also dated 1954, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson gives the initials of the typesetter, י.ד. (D.Y.)⁴³⁰ who, he says, was not given the original letters to work from, only copies. Additionally – and significant to this study – R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson makes the point that the typesetter, typical of *Chassidim* in general, was not concerned about historiography:

ובפרט בענינים שלא תפסו מקום כ"כ אצל החסידים כמו התאריכים וכיו"ב

"[Therefore, mistakes could occur] particularly with regard to matters that do not concern Chassidim all that much, such as dates and the like" (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 9, 1999:31).⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ Translation is mine. Round brackets are R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson's.

⁴³⁰ Havlin (2010:527) informs us of his full name, Dovber Yurovitch.

⁴³¹ Translation and square brackets are mine. It is interesting to note that both letters from R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson seem to offer different interpretations of *Chassidism's* attitude towards history. One letter states that "a Chassidic court ...[would] have knowledge of Chassidic history" (Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:249-251) – while the other letter states that "dates and the like" would not "concern Chassidim all that much" (Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 9, 1999:31).

R. David Tzvi Hilman challenges R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson on the issue of the typesetter and after presenting his (Hilman's) litany of arguments in favour of the letters being outright forgeries, declares:

והרי טעויות מסוג זה וכיו"ב אינן טעות הבחור הזעזער אגב שיטפיה

"Mistakes such as those outlined could not [simply] have been made in haste by the youth who acted as the typesetter..." (Hilman 1955:534).⁴³²

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson further suggests that mistakes would be expected when copying cursive handwriting (as opposed to square printed text) and the many abbreviations and acronyms would also hamper the process. Havlin (2010:527), however, points out, that the abbreviations *remain* as incomplete abbreviations even in the published letters.

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson provides statistical evidence to bolster his approbation of the letters, suggesting that the errors in the dating fall within accepted parameters for copied material:

"The major argument of those who doubt the authenticity of these letters is that the dates do not correspond appropriately. Anyone who has ever worked on copying and editing will know that mistakes are likely to occur in about five per cent of the work. This is especially the case where one copies in haste" (Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:249).⁴³³

This is difficult to understand because, as we shall see, there appear to be major and significant historical inconsistencies over and above just dates that do not correspond. There are some very unusual entries in these letters. Most of these letters are relatively short and the grammar is incorrect. The writing does not correspond to the form of language used by *Chassidim* in the time of the Baal Shem Tov and all the letters are written in the same linguistic style (Hilman 1953:242).

⁴³² Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴³³ Translation is mine.

Family names like Rapoport and Horowitz are commonly used in the *Kherson Geniza*, even though family names were not customary during those times (Hilman 1953:242).⁴³⁴

Most of the original and authentic *Chassidic* letters that have reached us from verifiable sources do not even contain dates. Those few that do, only refer to the year. However, the letters of the *Kherson Geniza* contain specifics of dates in over ninety per cent of the cases. Moreover, the detailed dating is cleverly presented as, say, the first day (Sunday) of the weekly Torah portion of (say, *Shemot*) without mentioning the day of the month (say, 12 *Adar*). This way a forger would not have to worry about working with an accurate calendar or about mistakenly presenting letters as being written on *Shabbat*. Notwithstanding, on numerous occasions, the alleged forger confused the instances when there was a double Torah portion and a single Torah portion as is the case during leap years; and on some occasions, when the day of the month is presented, the letters turn out to have been written on *Shabbat* (Hilman 1955:533).

In response to the question of why the alleged letters of these great rabbis contain very little Torah⁴³⁵ content, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson writes that the early leaders of the *Chassidic* movement rarely wrote down their teachings, preferring oral means of transmission (Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 9, 1999:32). Hilman (1955:536) challenges this notion and asks how is it possible that out of hundreds of letters not one was found with Torah content suitable for publication? He suggests a more benign reason for this anomaly – the forger was most likely not proficient or learned enough to produce such Torah literature.

In one instance, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi is said to have referred to the work *Teshuvot haRambam (Responsa of Maimonides)* as a reference source (Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.2, Document 298, 1975:781). No technical teachings are expounded upon. However, the alleged forger stumbled here because, at the date provided for

⁴³⁴ While the use of family names for the general population did begin from around the eleventh century and was well-established at around the end of the sixteenth century, this was not the case for Jews who, having previously lived in ghettos, only adopted family names from around the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Online source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/name/Family-names>. Retrieved on 07 December 2023.

⁴³⁵ The word 'Torah' is used here, not in the sense of the Pentateuch, but as Jewish religious teachings originating from the *Talmud* or *Kabbalah*.

this letter, 1808, the work was still referred to as *Igrot veShut haRambam* (*Letters and Responsa of Maimonides*) – and it was only fifty years later, from 1858, that new editions of that work were published under the revised title of *Teshuvot haRambam*. Furthermore, the writer references “*Chelek Bet*” (*Section Two*) of the same and incorrectly titled work, *Teshuvot haRambam*, even though the earlier editions available during the lifetime of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi were not yet divided into sections.⁴³⁶ Thus, in 1808, the title of the work as well as its division into sections (*Teshuvot haRambam*, *Chelek Bet*) would have been anachronistic. Additionally, this particular letter is addressed to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s student R. Aharon of Staroselye. The problem is that R. Aharon only settled in Staroselye some years after his teacher passed away, which was in 1812 – so in 1808, he would not yet have been living in Staroselye (Hilman 1955:536).

In another instance (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.2, 1975:450), the Baal Shem Tov is said to have referenced the “*Responsa of Radbaz in the section of Even haEzer, Responsum 132.*” The alleged forger was not aware that *Teshuvot haRadbaz* (*Responsa of Radbaz*) was not divided into the common four legal sections of *Halacha*⁴³⁷ which included *Even haEzer*.⁴³⁸

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson also responded to the results of the fibre testing conducted in Vienna in 1922 under the auspices of Avraham Schwadron, as mentioned earlier. The tests showed that the letter could not have been written before 1846. R. Yisrael of Ruzhin was arrested and had his collection of writings confiscated in 1838 which was eight years earlier, so the letter could not have been part of the Ruzhin collection. According to R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, R. Yisrael of Ruzhin eventually escaped and wanted to get his collection of letters back. The only way he could accomplish that was by bribing the authorities who had access to the archives. In order not to arouse suspicion, it was decided that the safest option would be to replace the original letters with copies that resembled them. Thus, the letters

⁴³⁶ Hilman’s version of this text included reference to “*Section Two*” (Hilman 1953:267-8). This reference is somehow missing in the version in *haTamim* which only mentions *Teshuvot haRambam* (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.2, Document 298, 1975:774).

⁴³⁷ These four sections follow the order of the Tur and *Shulchan Aruch* (*Code of Law*): 1) *Orach Chaim* (Shabbat, Festivals and daily commandments); 2) *Yore Deah* (dietary, mourning and purity laws); 3) *Even haEzer* (marriage and divorce laws); and 4) *Choshen Mishpat* (civil laws).

⁴³⁸ Although *Shut haRadbaz* (Jerusalem 1987, 4) contains an index to all four legal sections, including *Maftehot meChelek Even haEzer* (*Index to the Section of Even haEzer*), the work is not divided into four distinct sections as the letter implies.

were copied in haste and this accounts for both the errors as well as the more modern fibre material (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:250-51).

Additionally, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson writes that more than seventy-five per cent of the letters were written on parchment, not paper, so the results of the paper testing have no bearing on the bulk of the letters (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 9, 1999:31). Parchment was also nearly impossible to attain in the vicinity of Odessa around 1917 during the political upheaval, so the letters on parchment must have been from an earlier time (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:249). Hilman (1955:536), however, counters that even the many parchment letters are indications of forgery because, during the period they were said to have been written, it would have been most unlikely that people would have communicated with personal letters on parchment, as paper had replaced parchment for writing and printing.

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson then pulled out a trump card that no one could argue with. He writes that among the collection of *Kherson Geniza* documents that were not published, were certain *Kamiot* (amulets), and:

הנה נמצא בהם וכן גם בהמכתבים שנתפרסמו ענינים שלא נודעו ברבים כ"א באו
במסורה רבי מפי רבי מאדמו"ר הזקן

"[t]here were found in them, and in [some] of the published writings, [secret] matters that were not known to the public, but were only transmitted through tradition from Rebbe to Rebbe [starting with] the Alter Rebbe [the first Chabad Rebbe, R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi]..." (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:249).⁴³⁹

Hilman (1955:538) pragmatically suggests that even if very mystical letters do exist, they would not form compelling evidence of authenticity because anyone could copy mystical writings from an ancient *Kabbalistic* work (even if they didn't understand it) and then present it as original writing. However, on the matter of secrets being transmitted from Rebbe to Rebbe, there is, of course, no way to verify or deny this.

⁴³⁹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Surprisingly, perhaps the compounding and overwhelming evidence of the letters being forgeries eventually weighed heavily even on R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, because, according to Havlin:

סימנים יש שגם האחרון שהחזיק במהימנותם, האדמו"ר מלובאוויץ חזר בו, ולא
החשיבם כמכתבים אוטנטיים

“[t]here are indications that the last person to vouch for their authenticity – the Rebbe [Menachem Mendel Schneerson] of Lubavitch [Chabad] – [eventually] retracted and no longer considered them to be authentic” (Havlin 2010:523).⁴⁴⁰

The Baal Shem Tov's nature and character are also depicted very differently in the *Kherson Geniza* from the way he had generally been portrayed until that time. Before the publication of the letters in *haTamim* in 1935, there existed only two or three letters of the Baal Shem Tov, but now there were about seventy. In the published letters in *haTamim*, the Baal Shem Tov is generally presented as a scholar of *Halacha*⁴⁴¹ who commands a thorough knowledge of the law. He is depicted as corresponding in writing to the leading rabbis of his time on matters of *Halacha*. This is in sharp contradistinction to the romanticised notion, of the Baal Shem Tov being a simple man, as propounded by the more secular writers. In the *Kherson Geniza*, the Baal Shem Tov doesn't suddenly emerge from a vague background, because the figure of his alleged teacher, R. Adam Baal Shem, writes to him and hands over 'secret writings.'

⁴⁴⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁴¹ I do notice, however, that a letter in the *Kherson Geniza* has the Baal Shem Tov call on his student, R. Dovber of Mezeritch to help him debate with the 'enemy' because he does not have the knowledge to “to respond accurately according to the law...[nor know] how to base his words on the Talmud” (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, Unnumbered document, 1975:124). According to this document, at least, it seems that the Baal Shem Tov is not being presented as great master of *Halacha* and *Talmud*. He is, however, still framed as an organisational leader because the letter opens with “we need to debate with our enemies,” implying that he is leading an official representative body or delegation. On the other hand, another letter exists, this time indeed framing the Baal Shem Tov as a typical scholarly rabbi: “And see the Twelve Lessons of the Ran, of blessed memory, [who cites] two reasons and wonderful proofs on this [matter]. See his golden language. And even though the immortality of the soul is true and fixed, without [any need for a] proof or reason - just like the [concept of] the revival of the dead - nevertheless our rabbis gave proofs for them... You should also reference the Midrash Talpiyot, Anaf Chidush haOlam, honourable and holy one, where it brings a proof from the Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, of blessed memory. And after that [see] the holy teaching of the Maasef, of blessed memory. See his holy and pure language, and your eyes will be enlightened” (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.2, Document 257, 1975:447). Translations are mine.

Thus, from the outset, the Baal Shem Tov is portrayed as being part of a structured and organised continuum. He is also associated with, and leads, a group of thirty-six hidden *Tzadikim* (*righteous men*). The letters convey repeated calls from R. Adam Baal Shem for the Baal Shem Tov to reveal himself and begin to openly manage and lead the new *Chassidic* movement (Meir 2023-).

R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson clearly uses the *Kherson Geniza* as an absolute basis for, and source of, historical facts. He writes, for example, about details of the group of hidden *Tzadikim*:

הצדיקים הנסתרים (אשר שמות איזה מהם אנו מוצאים בהגליונות והמכתבים של
הגניזה שנתגלתה זה לא כבר, כמו ר' מרדכי, ר' קהת ועוד)

“[Regarding] the hidden *Tzadikim* (some of whose names we find in the sheets and letters of the [Kherson] Geniza, [and] these [individuals] were not yet known to us [before the discovery of the Geniza], like R. Mordechai, R. Kehat and others)” (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:138).⁴⁴²

Significantly, this idea that the Baal Shem Tov was part of a well-structured organisation of hidden *Tzadikim*:

“does not occur in the hagiographical or any other Hasidic sources, but makes its first appearance in the Kherson material” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:142).

This structural imagery, peculiar to the *Kherson Geniza*, creates a backdrop of organisation and authority in the early *Chassidic* movement, and challenges the idea of the Baal Shem Tov as a free-wandering mystic, alone in the forests and mountains. It emerges, now, through the *Kherson Geniza*, that the Baal Shem Tov immediately formulates and controls a vibrant movement. Continuing with this alleged intensely structured framing, the letters describe how towards the end of his days, the Baal Shem Tov hands over the organisational reins of leadership to the *Magid of Mezeritch* who in turn transfers the leadership to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first *Rebbe* of *Chabad*:

⁴⁴² Translation is and square brackets are mine. Round brackets are in the original Hebrew in *haTamim*.

“[T]he Kherson material often appears to reflect a peculiarly HaBaD perspective on the early history of Hasidism, and to serve HaBaD interests” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:137).

The *Chabad* movement was not always as popular and relatively united as it is today. It had faced a number of bitter succession battles and had split into eleven factions under different *Rebbes* and different names, including *Ule*, *Staroselye*, *Lubavitch*, *Chabad*, *Kopust*, *Retzitza*, *Liadi*, *Niezhin*, *Ovrutch*, *Malachim* and *Hornisteipol*. Additionally, many other *Chassidic* dynasties had similarly evolved from the Baal Shem Tov. It was important, therefore, for *Chabad* to project an authoritative and direct line of succession, at least during the early period from the Baal Shem Tov, through the *Magid of Mezeritch* to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The *Kherson Geniza* may have served as a useful tool to this end because about half of the collection of letters is ascribed to the Baal Shem Tov and his students while the other half deals with R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (Koppel 2010:562). This creates an intense focus and emphasis on the central role of *Chabad* in the overall history of the *Chassidic* movement despite its succession battles.

The letters depict the Baal Shem Tov as a more contemporary rabbi, not living in the eighteenth century – but rather conducting himself along the lines of the thought and behaviour of rabbis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Meir 2023-). Some of the letters seem to exhibit anachronistic *Chabad/Chassidic* innuendos. In one letter, reference is made to the Baal Shem Tov travelling the night after *Shabbat*, still dressed in his special בגדי שבת (*Shabbat garments*) and his הטיליג העליון (*overcoat*) (Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:16).⁴⁴³ This may just be a benign reference to smart Sabbath clothes but, in later *Chassidic* culture and custom, special garments like the long flowing frock coat or *Kapota* became recognisable as specific *Chassidic* attire. Wearing a *Kapota* after *Shabbat* on Saturday nights remains an important *Chabad Chassidic* custom to this day.

Another letter mentions that the *Magid of Mezeritch* sent the girdle belonging to the Baal Shem Tov to R. Kehat who was ill, as a healing amulet. אני שלחתי לו אבנט אחד. (I sent him one of your girdles (*gartel*) as protection) (R. Yosef

⁴⁴³ Translation is mine.

Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.2, 1975:560).⁴⁴⁴ Wearing the special long girdle or belt (*gartel*) belonging to a holy man or *Rebbe* is considered to have protective qualities. The *Chassidic gartel* is a distinctly symbolic and recognisable mark of the *Chabad* movement.

In another example, the Baal Shem Tov writes to his daughter Adel informing her that שכחתי את האבנט המשי של שבת קודש (*I have forgotten my Shabbat silk girdle [gartel]*) (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:345)⁴⁴⁵ and requests that she send it to him. Silk frock coats and *gartels* were to become important markers in the later *Chassidic* movement.

The last *Chabad Rebbe*, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson writes:

“In general, the conduct [of *Chassidei Chabad*] should be distinctive, and this should express itself in the fact that on Shabbat and Festivals, one wears a silk *kapota* [זיידענע זופיצעס]... שבגדי שבת ויו”ט צריכים להיות... The special Shabbat garments [בגדי שבת]⁴⁴⁶ should be made out of silk” (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Torat Menachem*, 1950, vol. 1, 53).⁴⁴⁷

Besides these apparent and anachronistic *Chabad/Chassidic* innuendos, a more pressing issue is the historicity of Baal Shem Tov’s alleged participation in the debates with the *Frankists*.⁴⁴⁸ The ferocious deliberation by historians and theologians over the Baal Shem Tov’s opposition or association with *Sabbatianism* is swiftly dealt with in the letters. In the *Kherson Geniza*, there is no discussion whatsoever. The Baal Shem Tov is presented as unequivocally opposed to *Sabbatianism* and he even excommunicates the *Frankists* in the famous debates of Kamenets-Podolsk (1757) and Levov (1759) – although there is no historical evidence of his participation in those debates. Regarding the way the *Frankist* debates are depicted in the *Kherson Geniza*:

“This apparent corroboration of what had been established as a false report, and its ill-informed embellishment, so that a victory is

⁴⁴⁴ Translation is mine.

⁴⁴⁵ Translation is mine.

⁴⁴⁶ Compare this reference to the similar “*special Shabbat garments*” mentioned above (Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:16).

⁴⁴⁷ Translation is mine.

⁴⁴⁸ The *Frankists* were the more radical branch of the *Sabbatian* movement.

announced when in reality the outcome was defeat, was in fact one of the first Kherson documents which aroused the suspicion of scholars and led to their exposure as forgeries” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:133).

Far from a victory, the historical defeat at the debate in Kamenets-Podolsk, for example, was a terrible blow to the Jews:

“Bishop Dembowski ruled in favour of the *Sabbatians* and cartloads of *Talmudic* books were confiscated from Jewish homes in Kamenetz, Lvov, Brody, Zolkiew and burned in the marketplace of Kamenetz-Podolsk and hundreds of Jews converted to Catholicism (Doktór 2015:396-411).

Kamenets-Podolsk, in 1757, was no glorious victory. The debate in Levov in 1759 was no better either because, after that debate, Jacob Frank claimed that five thousand of his followers were ready for conversion to Christianity (Scholem 1987:296).

Notwithstanding, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson persists in defending the historicity of the alleged participation of the Baal Shem Tov in these ‘victorious’ debates, citing the *Kherson Geniza* as historical evidence. He writes:

מורנו הבעש"ט ערך כמה ויכוחים עם הפרנקיסטי' עד אשר נצחם - כמבואר בארוכה
בכתבי הגניזה הנ"ל - והנצחון הזה גרם לשנאה כבושה מצד הפרנקיסטים אל מורנו
הבעש"ט ותלמידיו

“Our master the Baal Shem Tov presided over a number of disputations with the Frankists until he defeated them – as is explained at length in the writings of the aforementioned [*Kherson Genizah*] – and this victory triggered pent-up hatred from the Frankists towards the Baal Shem Tov and his students (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:139).⁴⁴⁹

This way, difficult historical questions and missing information are all resolved by the ‘evidence’ exhibited within these letters. These observations and discrepancies were widely noted long before the letters were eventually published by R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson in 1935. Yet, surprisingly, while aware of the allegations of forgery, R.

⁴⁴⁹ Translation is mine.

Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson still went ahead and published a large section of the letters in *haTamim*, and he even included an Introduction.

Meir (2023-) suggests that the only way to understand this conundrum is by considering the context and *Sitz im Leben* of those times. While R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson was living in Warsaw, many of his followers were still in Russia undergoing hardships. The *Chabad* community was fractured and he needed to create a new and inspiring forum for the refugees. This was a very difficult time because back in Russia:

“the Jewish ‘sections’ of the propaganda department of the Russian Communist Party were engaged in the systematic eradication of all national and religious institutions of Jewish life: community councils, synagogues, religious academies and schools, ritual baths, ritual slaughter houses and butchers, Hebrew libraries and books were being liquidated with the help of the internal security forces” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:145).

R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson responded boldly to these challenges. He conducted:

“an underground operation, sending out secret emissaries - rabbis, teachers, ritual slaughterers, and other specialists in Jewish lore - as well as material resources to Jewish settlements which had been cut off and were becoming estranged from their tradition” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:145).

It seems that he began to view the early *Chassidic* movement as a reflection of his own religious activism and organisational acumen.⁴⁵⁰ In 1930, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson wrote:

מאז ומקדם תפסו ההסתדרות והתעמולה מקום חשוב מאד במחנה החסידים, ועוד
טרם שנתגלה מורנו הבעש"ט נ"ע, בהיותו עוד בהסתר, ה" הוא וחבריו הצדיקים
הנסתרים... מסודרים בהסתדרות חזקה וקבעו להם מרכזים במקומות שונים וכל אחד

⁴⁵⁰ R. Chaim Lieberman, mentioned earlier as serving as R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson's secretary and librarian – who admitted that he had met the forger of the Kherson Geniza – was directly involved in the clandestine operations in the Soviet Union. Like his *Rebbe*, he too was arrested. He went by the code name **Rachel** (the acronym for **R. Chaim Lieberman**), and the Bolshevik secret police, at first, thought he was woman. He later published some of his writing under the title *Ohel Rachel*. Online source: <https://www.toviapreschel.com/reb-chaim-libermans-ohel-rachel/>. Retrieved on 27 December 2023.

מהם הי' עובד במרכז שלו, ומזמן לזמן היו שולחים הרצאות מפורטות להמרכז שאצל מורנו הבעש"ט נ"ע.

"Since its very inception, the notion of order and propaganda has played a most primary role within the Chassidic camp. Even before our master the Baal Shem Tov was revealed, while he was still in hiding, he and his colleagues, the hidden Tzadikim...were managed with intense organisation. They established centres in various places and each would run their own centres. At regular intervals, they would send detailed reports to the [main] centre of the Baal Shem Tov" (R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *haTamim*, vol.1, 1975:138).⁴⁵¹

Anyone even vaguely familiar with the *Chabad* movement today would immediately recognise these familiar archetypes of structure, marketing and the dispatching of global emissaries who report regularly to the centralised authority. The use of language and the description of the 'original' *Chassidic* organogram – as per the *Kherson Geniza* – does appear anachronistic, as if the Baal Shem Tov was living in, and adopting the strategies of, the later generations of *Chabad Rebbes*.

There is a certain irony to R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson's unshakable promotion of this *Chassidic* version of history because, in 1814 when *Shivchei haBesht* was first published, its author apologised to its audience for the ahistorical and legendary style of the book. However, just over a century later, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson was promoting the unquestionable historicity of the *Kherson Geniza* which was supporting the very narratives in *Shivchei haBesht*:

"[I]n the second decade of the nineteenth century, the author of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* still needed to apologize for writing apparently 'meaningless narratives' or 'histories,' and to derive the legitimacy of this medium from the value of edification which it promoted...[yet] by the first half of the twentieth century the Admor Joseph Isaac could take for granted the full legitimacy of the historiographical medium [of the *Kherson Geniza*]" (Rapoport-Albert 1988:153).⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁵² Square brackets are mine.

R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, however, only published one photocopy of the actual letters while all the others were printed versions. In his 'Introduction' to the first edition of *haTamim* in 1935, he writes that the *Geniza* did not only comprise letters, but also personal items belonging to the authors, including the Baal Shem Tov's pipe, his walking stick and his private collection of books (Schneerson, *haTamim*, 1975:11). This creates the impression that the entire body of the *Kherson Geniza* findings is authentic.

Meir (2023-) tries to understand the motivation behind R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson's intense desire to promote the *Kherson Geniza* against the flow of scholarship that overwhelmingly pronounced its fraudulent origins and content. R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson is known for his dedication to building and strengthening the *Chabad* movement during difficult times, but he also had aspirations to be a writer. Had he not been involved in the leadership of his movement, he may have become one of the great Hebrew and Yiddish writers. He had lived in Warsaw which was the centre of Jewish literature. He loved literature, writing and history, particularly *Chabad* history. He collected oral accounts from older *Chabad Chassidim* and recorded them in his diary:

"[M]any of his publications were in the historiographical genre, a genre in which none of his HaBaD or general Hasidic predecessors had ever expressed [themselves]" (Rapoport-Albert 1988:139-40).⁴⁵³

Meir (2023-) points out that, in effect, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson had created a masterpiece of hagiography comprising a particular narrative of *Chassidic* history through the idiom of the *Kherson Geniza*. He could easily have placed the collection of letters in his private collection, but he doubled down, and between 1935 and 1938, he chose to publish them in his *haTamim* journal.

"It could, had he so wished, have been suppressed and quickly forgotten. The Admor Joseph Isaac elected to risk discredit by association with the *Kherson Genizah* because he clearly recognized its immense value to his novel historiographical enterprise" (Rapoport-Albert 1988:139).

⁴⁵³ Square brackets are mine.

In R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson's narrative, the Baal Shem Tov is no longer a romantic reformer. He is no longer a simple wandering mystic.

"This historiography developed as...a reaction against...the Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries"
(Rapoport-Albert 1988:130).

The Baal Shem Tov is now a master of *Halacha* and his leadership style coincides with, and was reflected in, the style of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi and the later *Chabad Rebbes*. R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson offered a powerful counter-narrative. This would have served to challenge the abovementioned three dominating, if not threatening, narratives of:

- 1) the mainstream *Chassidic* movements;
- 2) the style of '*Beshtian Chassidism*' active between the two world wars which longed for a *Chassidic* 'renaissance' and a return to a purer *Chassidism*, without the structures of the *Rebbes*, and;
- 3) the modern secular writers' fascination with the romanticism and freedom of the Baal Shem Tov.

R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson showed the fractured *Chabad* community reeling from the hardships in Russia and grappling with integration into the new world, just how important traditionalism, structure, *Halacha* and the *Chassidic* organogram were. To this end, one may assume that it didn't matter to him whether the texts were forgeries or not because he was restoring the honour of the Baal Shem Tov. He was also rescuing the Baal Shem Tov from the three hegemonies of *mainstream Chassidim*, the 'renaissance' *Chassidim*, and the *enlightened writers*. He used the *Kherson Geniza* for his theological and literary goals while simultaneously regaining and maintaining ownership of the 'historical' Baal Shem Tov narrative (Meir 2023-).

Evan Mayse and Daniel Reiser make a similar observation (although in a different context) that there were:

"many invented traditions [...] ⁴⁵⁴ of Menachem Mendel's father-in-law and predecessor, Yosef Yitshak Schneersohn (1880-1950), whose extensive writings on the development of Chabad represent an

⁴⁵⁴ Square brackets are mine for emphasis.

attempt to construct a sacred history of the community's leadership and evolution" (Mayse and Reiser 2018:137).

Eventually, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson arrived in New York in 1940 and – perhaps quite tellingly after he transitioned to a new and more historically critical environment – he hardly mentioned the *Kherson Geniza* again. The *Kherson Geniza* had now assumed a backstage position. That is, until 1954.⁴⁵⁵ In that year, the last *Chabad Rebbe*, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, suddenly wrote a sharp defence of the *Kherson Geniza* in support of his father-in-law R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson who had passed away in 1950. R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson committed himself to officially endorsing the authenticity and historicity of the *Kherson Geniza*.

This formal approbation in 1954 was not without context. R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson issued this statement of approval because, in the previous year – 1953 – R. David Tzvi Hilman had just published a book entitled, *Igrot Baal haTanya uVenei Doro*, containing the genuine letters of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The letters of the *Kherson Geniza*, however, were blatantly excluded from this collection because R. David Tzvi Hilman was convinced of the fraudulent nature of these letters and he did not hide his opinion on this matter.

Perhaps alluding to this, R. David Tzvi Hilman writes in the 'Introduction' to his anthology:

לא הבאתי השערות או שמועות שבעל פה וכד' שאין להן עדות ברורה

"I have not included oral assumptions or rumours and suchlike, all of which have no clear evidence" (Hilman 1953:3).⁴⁵⁶

Being familiar with the genuine writing style of the early *Chassidic Rebbes*, R. David Tzvi Hilman soon concluded that:

כל מכתבי הגנידה שראו את אור הדפוס הנם מזויפים

⁴⁵⁵ The letter in *Igrot Kodesh* (R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 8, 1998:249) has the date as Iyar 1954.

⁴⁵⁶ Translation is mine.

“all the letters of the [Kherson] Geniza that were published, are forgeries” (Hilman 1953:240).⁴⁵⁷

R. David Tzvi Hilman noticed that although more than thirty rabbis are represented as writers in the *Kherson Geniza*, all their letters were of exactly the same writing style; and none of them corresponded to the style of other letters of those same rabbis that are known to be authentic. Even a *dilettante* forger would not make such a basic mistake of presenting so many different writers using the same language and style (Hilman:1955:530,532).

R. David Tzvi Hilman goes so far as to state that:

ורבים הוטעו להאמין באמיתותם של מכתבים אלו

“many were *deceived* into believing in the authenticity of these letters” (Hilman 1953:241).⁴⁵⁸

This created a tremendous scandal in *Chabad* and R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson chose to defend the absolute authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza*. Meir (2023-) doubts that the last two *Chabad Rebbes* personally believed in the authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza* because he maintains that not one historian or scholar believes in the authenticity of this *Geniza*. It must be noted that not all sects of *Chassidim* unanimously accepted the authenticity of the *Kherson Geniza* either:

“A number of Hasidic leaders were quick to dissociate themselves from the discredited Genizah while others continued to endorse it as authentic; in scholarly circles the condemnation of the letters as forgeries has become virtually universal” (Rapoport-Albert 1988:129).

The leadership of *Chabad*, however, did (at least publicly) promote the *Kherson Geniza* as an authentic repository of genuine and vital *Chassidic* manuscripts. The problem was that there were no good options for them. There was no way to deny the existence of the *Kherson Geniza*. Sections of the collection had been published in 1935 and the rest were located in the *Chabad Library*. Within *Chabad* circles, there remains some tension over the matter of the *Kherson Geniza* to this day, although the

⁴⁵⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁵⁸ Translation and emphasis are mine.

officially published and popular works on *Chassidic* history follow the narrative of the *Geniza* letters which serve as authoritative historical sources.

In any event, the much larger bulk of the *Kherson Geniza*, which was not published in *haTamim*, remains housed in the *Chabad* Library. This collection of letters remains inaccessible to the public, let alone researchers who might want to revisit the matter and put an end to the controversy, whatever the outcome. Our knowledge of history today coupled with modern technology would hastily resolve the issue once and for all.

In more recent times, the computer scientist Moshe Koppel has subjected the published sections of the *Kherson Geniza* to statistical analysis to check the letters against known and genuine writings of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi.⁴⁵⁹ Koppel created and compared three databases: 1) The letters in the *Kherson Geniza* that are *attributed* to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi; 2) The known *autographic* letters of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi from other sources; and 3) The writings *attributed* to other authors in the *Kherson Geniza*. These were all equalised and names and places were deleted. Koppel demonstrated statistically that the author of the letters attributed to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi was the same author of the rest of the letters in the collection. It follows that since R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi was certainly ruled out as a candidate for authorship (because the *Kherson* writings did not match his authentic writing style),⁴⁶⁰ the letters, statistically, had to be forgeries (Koppel 2010:565).

Meir (2023-) notes that even were it to be established beyond a shadow of a doubt that the letters in the *Kherson Geniza* are forgeries, there would still be great literary and theological value in their study, as they have taken upon a life of their own and reflect the tendentious intentions of the forger, forgers or enhancers. In the meantime, this vast literature remains under lock and key, hidden from the public. Having elsewhere translated into English for the first time the more than three hundred published letters of the *Kherson Geniza*, I would have loved to continue to translate

⁴⁵⁹ The letters known to have been original and authored by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, were taken from Hilman's (1953) collection in his *Igrot Baal haTanya uVenei Doro*.

⁴⁶⁰ In the *Kherson* letters *attributed* to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, for example, we find frequent use of the abbreviation וכו' (*etc.*). In his *autographic* letters, however he used the shorter abbreviation כו' instead. Similarly the frequent use of abbreviations like the honorifics כ"ק (כבוד קדושת) (*honourable and holy*) and י"נ (יחיה נצח) (*may you live eternally*) are found in the letters attributed to him, but he did not use these at all in his autographic writings (Koppel 2010:565-6).

the rest of the fascinating unpublished collection. I have twice requested, in writing, for permission from the Chabad Library to view the other Kherson letters but did not receive a response.

5.2.3.1 Synthesis

As mentioned in the Introduction to this section, I have intentionally dedicated much space to the controversy, if not the scandal, of the *Kherson Geniza*, for two reasons.

1) Firstly, I use the *Kherson Geniza* as a test case demonstrating that internal *Chassidic* sources sometimes serve not only as enhancing existing hagiographical material, but also as intentional and fraudulent interpolations to promote the narrative of certain sects, in this case, *Chabad*.

The critical use of expressions such as הוטעו להאמין, where the followers are “deceived into believing” (Hilman 1953:241) the זיופים גלויים “open forgeries” (Balaban 1935:320) of the *Kherson Geniza*, indicate how far some formulations of *Chassidism* were prepared to go to shape and reframe literature of their origin stories. The fact that the literary authenticity may even be repeatedly endorsed by the grand authority of multiple *Chassidic Rebbes* does not make them reliable historical sources.

The *Kherson Geniza* is another striking example of this study’s *literature and personalities approach*, where certain *literature* is promoted by certain *personalities* in a tendentious manner, to drive a particular and tendentious narrative.

2) Secondly, I have tried to demonstrate that the *Kherson Geniza* is presented largely as ‘evidence’ and corroboration of the events as portrayed in *Shivchei haBesht*, published a century earlier. Both sets of literature unequivocally dispel the question of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement and emphasise intense opposition to *Sabbatianism*. However, by arguing in support of the fraudulent provenance of the *Kherson Geniza*, its use as a reliable historical record is significantly undermined.

If, for example, internal layers of authorised *Chassidic* literature like the *Kherson Geniza* fraudulently manifested ‘documentary evidence’ concerning the debates with the *Frankists* – by transforming historical defeats into theological victories – it could just as easily have suppressed uncomfortable questions of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* movement. As I have tried to demonstrate, the *Kherson Geniza*, possibly shoring up the accounts contained in *Shivchei haBesht*, presents the

Baal Shem Tov as unequivocally opposed to *Sabbatianism* and even excommunicating the *Sabbatian-Frankists*. This way the *Kherson Geniza* becomes comparable to the other literature sources examined in this study, where textual interventions were often actively deployed to limit, downgrade and hide *Sabbatian* tendencies pervasive at the time of the rise of the *Chassidic* movement.

We now examine a different methodology for dealing with the difficult challenges of history that may have been assumed by a different school of *Chassidism*, namely, *Breslov*.

5.3 R. Nachman of Breslov's *Tikun haKelali* as a 'fixing' of *Sabbatianism*

5.3.1 Introduction

Allied with the possible *historical revisionism* within the *Chabad* tradition – as per the previous section on the *Kherson Geniza* – may have been a parallel process of *theological reinterpretation* of the *Breslover* tradition. It can be argued that *theological reinterpretation* of *Chassidism* may have occurred in the literature of the *Chassidic* leader, R. Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810). Unlike the case of *historical revisionism*, where the history is somewhat *altered*, *theological reinterpretation* allows for the history to be obliquely *recognised*, but *cleansed* of any negative theological implications and connotations.

This section explores the idea of *theological reinterpretation* as it may have been presented in the recorded evidence and printed trail of R. Nachman's thought. The *historical revisionism* and *theological reinterpretation* that seem to have taken place within the schools of *Chabad* and *Breslov* respectively, is significant. This is because both movements are among the most popular and recognisable formulations of *Chassidism* today, and, therefore, they serve as important markers, indicators and test cases.

5.3.2 R. Nachman's 'fixing'⁴⁶¹ of *Sabbatianism*

Yehuda Liebes (1995b:109) maintains that R. Nachman was – at least in his early days – influenced by the *Sabbatian* and *Frankist* movements. This is astonishing

⁴⁶¹ Throughout this study, the terms 'fix,' 'refine,' 'rectify,' and 'remedy' are used loosely as translations of the Hebrew term '*Tikun*.'

considering that R. Nachman was the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, and was born and raised in his very house.⁴⁶² Liebes suggests that in his youth, R. Nachman may have had contact with *Frankists* who had remained Jewish and who were plentiful in Podolia at that time.

R. Nachman is well known for his famous work, the *Tikun haKelali* (*General Remedy*) which included the recitation of ten specifically chosen psalms, which he claimed could ‘rectify’ sexual sins. Liebes, however, argues that R. Nachman really intended to ‘rectify’ the sin of *Sabbatianism* (Liebes 1995:90). *Sabbatians* were known for their promiscuity, which – based on their *Sabbatian Kabbalah* – required them to actually enter into the realm of sin in order to elevate it (*yeridah tzorech aliya*, or *descent for the sake of ascent*) as final preparation for what they believed were messianic times (see section 2.5.1.1). The parallelism between *Sabbatian* promiscuity and the need to ‘rectify’ sexual sins through the *Tikun haKelali*, forms part of this argument.

Like all *Chassidic Rebbes*, a large body of hagiography has risen around his personality, and R. Nachman himself was not averse to self-praise, or, as his followers would interpret it, ‘speaking the truth about himself’. On many occasions, he called himself the greatest *Tzadik* of the generation, and even previous generations. He claimed to be greater than the Baal Shem Tov, and this was why his uncle R. Baruch of Medzebuzh became estranged from him. R. Nachman said that at the age of thirteen, he had already surpassed the greatness of his great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov (R. Avraham Hazan, *Avaneha Barzel*, 1961:17). Shaul Magid succinctly describes R. Nachman as follows:

“More than any other Chasidic master before or after, Nachman’s teachings are largely about him” (Magid in Mark 2010:7).⁴⁶³

R. Nachman saw himself as both the *Mashiach ben David* and particularly the *Mashiach ben Yosef*. In a text that has been severely censored – probably under R. Nachman’s orders as it was published in his lifetime – it is recorded that he said:

וְאִזְנֵי נִשְׁבְּרִים הַשְׁלַחַן מִרַּב הָעוֹלָם שֶׁדָּחֲקוּ עֲצָמָיו עָלָיו

⁴⁶² R. Nachman was born in 1772, twelve years after the passing of the Baal Shem Tov in 1760.

⁴⁶³ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

“‘There is a certain Tzadik [righteous man] who incorporates both messiahs together.’ [R. Nachman] further said many more things that cannot be printed. Then the table broke because everyone crowded around him” (R. Natan Sternharz, *Chayei Moharan*, Ch 6, 1874:3a)⁴⁶⁴

Arthur Green points out that taken in context:

“[w]hen Nahman used a phrase like ‘there is one zaddiq,’ his disciples knew well that the reference was to none other than himself” (Green 1992:190).

R. Nachman references this certain and unique *Tzadik* on almost every page of his *magnum opus*, *Likutei Moharan*. The *Breslover Chassidim* have always had a tradition that these references are to R. Nachman himself. In a sense, R. Nachman was a stand-alone *Tzadik* who did not acknowledge his contribution as part of a chain, continuum and illustrious lineage beginning with his great-grandfather the Baal Shem Tov. Instead, he removed himself from the dynastic order and, considering his

“proximity to the Sabbatean heresy and its aftermath...[and his] oblique references to what he believed was his messianic fate...[this became] troubling for many in the Chasidic and non-Chasidic communities where he lived” (Magid in Mark 2010:7).⁴⁶⁵

It is common for *Chassidim* to venerate their *Rebbes*. At worst this would only awaken the ire of the *Mitnagdim* (*non-Chassidim*). However, an apparent claim to the title of Messiah – specifically at a time when *Sabbatianism* and *Frankism* were still active and secret influencing factors – is another matter entirely:

“No wonder that Nahman took care in his early years to keep handwritten copies of his teachings safe from the probing eyes of any outsider. Even when he did print the teachings, he was careful to delete some of the most sensitive passages” (Green 1992:196).

Yet, in stark contrast to scholars like Liebes, Green insists over and over again that in his view it is not correct to associate R. Nachman with *Sabbatianism*:

⁴⁶⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁶⁵ Square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

“The serious differences between Sabbatianism and Nahman’s messianic longings should not be minimized” (Green 1992:216, note 21).

Magid, however, seems to subtly understand R. Nachman’s relationship to *Sabbatianism* as follows:

“[T]he Sabbatean controversy was still burning a destructive path through Eastern Europe, and the messianic hope that ended so tragically with Sabbatai Zevi was transferred in a different hue to the Baal Shem Tov and his Chasidic movement. It is likely that Nachman viewed his role as the culmination of this seismic change serving as the messianic figure who would close the circle of Jewish, and world, history” (Magid in Mark 2010:8).⁴⁶⁶

R. Nachman’s approach to messianism attracted much attention. Around 1805 – which was 5566 in the Hebrew calendar (566 has the numerical value of *Mashiach ben Yosef*) – R. Nachman began assigning penitential practices and fasts to his immediate followers in preparation for the envisioned messianic event. In that same auspicious year, R. Nachman instituted the midnight petition known as *Tikun Chatzot*, as well as his *Tikun haKelali*. Gershom Scholem (1971c:99) points out that an increase in penitential prayers and practices always indicates the belief that messianic redemption is imminent. Even R. Yehuda Leib of Shpola (1725-1811), known as the *Shpole Zeida*, and R. Baruch of Medzebuzh (R. Nachman’s uncle) became suspicious of R. Nachman. This may have particularly been as a result of the unusual and frenzied messianic activity of that year because the:

“awareness on the part of outsiders...[of] the excitement brewing in Bratslav⁴⁶⁷ had a familiarly dangerous edge to it” (Green 1992:208).⁴⁶⁸

During that same time, there was also an urgency to collect, edit and disseminate R. Nachman’s teachings, which had been largely kept secret up to that point. Green

⁴⁶⁶ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

⁴⁶⁷ The Podolian town was called ‘*Bratzlav*’ but the *Chassidim* from there romanticised it to ‘*Breslov*’ as the latter resembles the Hebrew phrase *lev basar* (a *heart of flesh*). The two names are often used interchangeably.

⁴⁶⁸ Square brackets are mine.

points to this secrecy of R. Nachmans' writings by recording an oral testimony he heard from:

"a Bratslav *hasid* in about 1970 [who told him] that the community is still in possession of an uncensored version of *Hayey MoHaRan*" (Green 1992:20, note 5).⁴⁶⁹

One wonders why it would be necessary to keep a biography of R. Nachman secret – especially from his followers who cannot get enough of his teachings and yearn for every detail of his life story. Why would it have been necessary to have two versions of R. Nachman's biography, an uncensored version and a published censored version? Green continues with the observation that it was not just *Chayei Moharan*, but there were other works as well that were regarded as secret:

"A most important work of Nahman, *Megilat Setarim*, which was long thought to have been destroyed, is quoted by N.Z. Koenig, *Neweh Zaddikim*, pp 87ff., and apparently still exists" (Green 1992:20, note 5).

Green was correct because after his remarks about *Megilat Setarim* (*The Scroll of Secrets*), some followers within the *Breslov* community approached Zvi Mark and informed him that *Megilat Setarim* did indeed still exist in manuscript form. These individuals were fervently convinced that:

"bringing the scroll to light contributed to their belief that Nachman's teachings, even those hidden away, would procure the conditions for redemption" (Magid in Mark 2010:10).⁴⁷⁰

It also seems that there may have been some inter-communal politics playing out between the "*competing Breslav courts*" (Mark 2010:17). The scrolls do confirm the fact that, and highlight the extent to which, R. Nachman believed he was the Messiah. The scrolls also reveal the surprising universalistic approach R. Nachman adopted regarding non-Jews. R. Nachman believed his main role, as the Messiah, was to

⁴⁶⁹ Square brackets are mine. As we shall see below, subsequent to Green's writing, a number of hitherto secret writings have emerged, many of them published for the first time by Zvi Mark.

⁴⁷⁰ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

spend most of his time conversing with non-Jews to prepare them for the messianic event (Magid in Mark 2010:10).⁴⁷¹

For some reason, secrecy often seemed to go hand in hand with R. Nachman and his teachings:

“We know of one book which R. Nachman hid away, another which he burnt, as well as tales he forbade to reveal to outsiders. So it was that Breslav Chasidim, as a group, enshrouded themselves within a certain air of mystery and kept up a continual discourse concerning hidden works and hidden meanings in their Rebbe’s teaching” (Mark 2010:23).

After R. Nachman’s mysterious visit to the former *Sabbatian* enclave of Kamenets-Podolsk in 1798, and his return from his travels to the Land of Israel in 1799, he declared that all his writings that dated from before his journey to the Holy Land were to be disregarded, not studied and not even preserved (Green 1992:48). However, the later and more ‘official’ writings were collected and distributed just before *Shavuot* in 1805. On *Shavuot* that year, R. Nachman dressed for the first time in pure white garments and he made frequent references to redemption through the *Tzadik* which now took on a new urgency (Green 1992:210).

In 1805, when R. Nachman was thirty-three years old, his first son Shlomo Efraim was born. Until then, R. Nachman had expected one of his daughters’ sons to be the redeemer:

בְּשָׁנָה תַקס"ג עָשָׂה נְשׂוּאִין לְבִתּוֹ הַצַּדִּיקָה מֵרַת שָׂרָה...אַחֵר הַחֲפָה דִּבְרוּ מִמְּשִׁיחַ וְכו' (וְאָמַר רַבֵּנוּ ז"ל וְגִלָּה בְּרַמְזוֹ שְׂרָאוּי שְׂיֵצֵא מֵהֶם וְכו')

“In the year 1803, he [R. Nachman] married off his righteous daughter Sarah...After the ceremony, they spoke about the Messiah, etc. (and our rabbi hinted that it would be appropriate if he [the Messiah] emerged from this couple, etc.)” (R. Natan Sternharz, *Chayei Moharan*, Ch 13 (116⁴⁷²) 1874:19a).⁴⁷³

⁴⁷¹ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

⁴⁷² Some later editions have it as Lesson 116.

⁴⁷³ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Later, however, the messianic focus shifted to his own son instead. In keeping with his messianic preparations, in that same year of 1805, the *Tikun haKelali* was to emerge just three weeks after the birth of Shlomo Efraim (Green 1992:208).

But tragically, the infant soon passed away. It is at that low point that all his messianic expectations began to wane:

“Struggling to make sense of the tragic death of his infant son, Shlomo Efrayim...Nachman abandoned much of his messianic rhetoric. Soon after this tragic event he turned to storytelling” (Magid in Mark 2010:8).⁴⁷⁴

R. Nachman made his mysterious journeys to Kamenets-Podolsk in 1798 and to Shargorod in 1805. Both Kamenets-Podolsk and Shargorod had been known as *Sabbatian* centres. He made other secretive visits, incognito, to other Ukrainian centres as well, including Levov which was where the public debates with the *Frankists* had taken place in 1759. Kamenets-Podolsk was where the famous debate took place with the *Frankists* in 1757 and Jews were not allowed to inhabit the city. The *Frankists* – many of whom had converted to Christianity in 1759 and 1760 – were expelled from that city (and other cities of Podolia) after the death of Bishop Dembowski who had given them protection.

Green describes a very strange ceremony that took place during that visit by R. Nachman and an unnamed student who accompanied him:

“it is quite clear that Nahman’s visit to Kamenets-Podolsk had something to do with the *former* presence of Frankists in that city. After violating the local ordinance forbidding any Jew from spending a night within city limits, Nahman...had inquired, or by some means divined, which had been the houses occupied by the Frankists during the Kamenets debate. He then gained entry to those houses, and by means of his blessing and the glass of schnapps sought to perform some mysterious rite of purification. These houses had to be purified of the Frankist stain so that the Jews might dwell in them again.

⁴⁷⁴ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

Indeed, Nathan tells us, shortly after Nahman's visit the residence ban on Jews was lifted" (Green 1992:66).

A few years later, just after Passover in 1805, R. Nachman made another of his mysterious journeys, this time to Shargorod where he remained for two weeks. He had no known followers in Shargorod but nevertheless. The entire journey was shrouded in mystery:

והנסיעה הזאת היתה פליאה גדולה ונשגבה כי לא היה בה שום טעם על פי פשוט

"the journey was a great and exulted wonder because there was no reason for it in the simple sense" (R. Natan Sternharz, *Yemei MaHarnat*, 2009:13).⁴⁷⁵

On his return from Shargorod, we are told that fires began to rage in the town and R. Nachman remarked:

ואמר אלו היו יודעים בני שאריגראד הטובה שעשיתי להם וכו'

"If the townsfolk Shargorod only knew how much good I achieved for them, etc." (R. Natan Sternharz, *Chayei Moharan*, Lesson 18 (121⁴⁷⁶), 1874:19b).⁴⁷⁷

What R. Nachman meant by this is not at all clear – but it may tie in with Liebes' view that he wanted to affect a *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) for *Sabbatianism*. This may also have some connection to the unclear use of the term 'etc.' in the above quotation. Green (1992:209) describes this as the ubiquitous "*censor's etc.*," alluding to something the censors sensitive intentionally being left out of the narrative. Then, along similar lines to Liebes, Green surprisingly suggests:

"Perhaps Nahman had seen that the sparks of Sabbatian impurity had condemned Shargorod to undergo some terrible fate in the coming judgement, and he had sought to effect a *tiqqun* that would avoid this fate" (Green 1992:209).⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁵ Translation is mine.

⁴⁷⁶ Some later editions have it as Lesson 121.

⁴⁷⁷ Translation is mine.

⁴⁷⁸ This is surprising because as we saw earlier, Green (1992:216, note 21) maintains that "[t]he serious differences between Sabbatianism and Nahman's messianic longings should

Green's surprising acknowledgement that R. Nachman may have intended to affect some type of *Tikun* for *Sabbatianism* is significant because this brings him a little closer to Liebes' view that R. Nachman, through his *Tikun haKelali*, intended to 'rectify' the sin of *Sabbatianism* (Liebes 1995:90).⁴⁷⁹

But Green is very careful not to taint R. Nachman with the accusation that he a brush with *Sabbatianism* or *Frankism*. He makes this clear several times. Yet when Green describes R. Nachman's detractors, some of whom did indeed charge him with some form of association with *Sabbatianism*, he admits that:

[w]hile we have denied the allegation that Nahman's detractors accused him of Sabbatianism, it seems too striking to be coincidental that the persecution of Bratslav was at its height in the period during and after this outbreak of messianic fever [of 1805]...and the general derision with which Bratslav was met in broader Hassidic circles may well stem from this period" (Green 1992:221-222).⁴⁸⁰

Although Green is ever cautious about jumping to conclusions about R. Nachman's association with *Sabbatianism*, he does acknowledge the controversial nature of R. Nachman's messianism. It is not, however, always easy to understand R. Nachman's messianism because:

"[a]ny discussion of messianism as presented in the Bratslav sources is greatly complicated by the fact that here, more than in any other area, the hand of the censor has been particularly heavy" (Green 1992:185).

Green continues in a similar vein emphasising the secretive nature of R. Nachman's messianism:

"The frequent and secretive references to the final redemption in Bratslav literature as well as the highly-charged mysterious mood of

not be minimized" – unless we differentiate between R. Nachman's "*messianic longings*," and his need to "*effect a tiqqun*" to 'fix' the sin of *Sabbatianism*. However, as we shall see later, it is very difficult to fully understand R. Nachman's "*messianic longings*" because there, more than in any other area of his thought "*the hand of the censor has been particularly heavy*" (Green 1992:185).

⁴⁷⁹ The journey to Shargorod and the emergence of the *Tikun haKelali* both occurred in the same year of 1805.

⁴⁸⁰ Square brackets are mine.

penitence and excitement at once leave no doubt that the deep stirrings of redemption-longing were aroused here” (Green 1992:187).

On his return from the Land of Israel, R. Nachman visited R. Aryeh Leib of Shpole, known as the *Shpole Zeida* (or the *Shpole ‘Grandfather’*). Soon the two were to become bitter enemies after R. Nachman suddenly decided to settle in Zlotopolye, a strange choice considering that he had no followers in that city. His settling in Zlotopolye was in keeping with the strange pattern of travelling to places like Shargorod where he also had no followers – although it also seems that this was a move to provoke the seventy-five-year-old *Shpole Zeida*, as Zlotopolye was just two miles away from Shpole. R. Nachman remained in Zlotopolye for two years despite the ever-increasing hostility between him and the *Shpole Zeida* (Green 1992:102).

No one is quite sure why such great animosity developed between R. Nachman and the *Shpole Zeida*. This is strange because so many other details of R. Nachman’s life are so well documented. It could simply have been a matter of *hasagat gevul* (a *turf war*) but the hostility appears to have been more deeply seated. One *Breslover* source claims that the *Shpole Zeida* was upset that R. Nachman had endorsed the consumption of alcohol before the morning devotions to enhance the prayer experience (Hazan, *Yemey haTelaot*, 1932:174). Another source suggests that the *Shpole Zeida* accused R. Nachman of plagiarism claiming he had copied the secret writings of his (R. Nachman’s) grandfather, R. Nachman Horodenka (Sternharz, *Sichot haRan*, Ch 211, 1989:202). Green is not satisfied with either of these two explanations and is convinced that there must be something more fundamental that sparked the intense hostility:

“Aside from these two somewhat far-fetched matters, no explanation is found in the highly censored printed sources of Bratslav literature” (Green 1992:102).

Green (1992:103) acknowledges the ‘circumstantial evidence’ allowing one to assume that the *Shpole Zeida* accused R. Nachman of *Sabbatianism* or *Frankism*. This would account for the bitterness of the conflict, and this is also the view of some modern scholars, including Liebes, which we shall soon explore. However, Green once again cautions that:

“hard evidence to support this claim that Nahman was accused of Sabbatianism is lacking” (Green 1992:103).

The known internal *Breslover* sources “as is to be expected, tell us almost nothing” (Green 1992:103) as to the nature of the conflict. However, there are two sources that purport to provide external ‘documentary evidence’ of possible reasons for the bitter conflict between the *Shpole Zeida* and R. Nachman:

1) The first external source was produced in the twentieth century by Yehuda Rosenberg (1859-1935) who claimed that R. Nachman was too modern and secular (allegedly knowing languages and geography) compared to the older, more traditional and conservative *Shpole Zeida*. However, Green rejects this picture of a *modern* R. Nachman as a champion of *secular* knowledge because it is far from the more insular image projected by his actual writings (Green 1992:103).

2) The second external source is a document, entitled *Megilat Chassidei Bratslav*, and was published by Menachem Nachum Litinsky who claimed he received it personally in 1878 by none other than the brother of R. Natan Sternharz (who was R. Nachman’s closest disciple). It purports to be the writing of R. Natan Sternharz himself and mentions what he calls a ‘rumour’ that before R. Nachman was born, Jacob Frank had married a girl from Breslov (in 1757) who came from the ancestral family of R. Nachman, and that Breslov had been a centre of *Sabbatianism* and *Frankism*. Thus:

“there were many [*Frankists*] there [in Breslov] who held to the way of Shabbatai Tzvi...” (R. Natan Sternharz in Litinsky, *Megilat Chassidei Bratslav*, 1895:62f).⁴⁸¹

It was also rumoured – recorded the same author of the document (allegedly R. Natan Sternharz) – that he himself had come from the family of the false messiah and *Sabbatian*, R. Yehuda Leib Prossnitz (see section 3.1.6). However, the author defends both his own, and his teacher R. Nachman’s, untainted image:

“When the path of my teacher and master [R. Nachman] spread forth...other Chassidim, led by the old one [the *Shpole Zeida*] accused him of being a follower of that sect and a Sabbatian, though our

⁴⁸¹ Regarding this citation it must be noted that R. Natan Sternharz is the alleged author of this document as recorded by Menachem Nachum Litinsky.

master was innocent of that sin of which they accused him, as am I, his disciple” (R. Natan Sternharz in Litinsky, *Megilat Chassidei Bratslav*, 1895:62f).⁴⁸²

Green (1992:126-7, footnote 26) completely discredits the authenticity of Litinsky’s document for a number of reasons: 1) the writing style is not the style of R. Natan Sternharz that we are familiar with; 2) there is no typical malediction (like ‘*cursed be his name*’) after referring to Shabbatai Tzvi; and 3) ‘*Bratzlav*’ is referenced instead of the more common and colloquial ‘*Breslov*’ which would most likely have been used by R. Natan Sternharz.

Yehuda Liebes, however, takes a far more forthright approach to the matter of the *Shpole Zeida*’s alleged charge of *Sabbatianism* levelled against R. Nachman. Liebes maintains that the *Shpole Zeida* correctly accused R. Nachman of *Frankism*. Liebes (1995:90) also suggests that R. Nachman’s *Tikun haKelali* was conceptualised as a ‘remedy’ for *Sabbatianism* – and a better ‘remedy’ than the Baal Shem Tov’s mission of *המתקת דברי השבתאים* (*sweetening the words of the Sabbatians*) (Liebes 1995:92, 50-53).⁴⁸³

Liebes suggests that R. Nachman considered his *Tikun haKelali* to be a *שריון* (*Shiryon*) or ‘*armour*’ to theurgically protect those who recite it.⁴⁸⁴ Liebes (1995:91) connects this ‘protection’ to the battle against the *Frankists*. R. Nachman also referred

⁴⁸² Regarding this citation it must be noted that R. Natan Sternharz is the alleged author of this document as recorded by Menachem Nachum Litinsky.

⁴⁸³ This was essentially why R. Nachman considered himself to have surpassed the ways of his great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov. R. Nachman claims that had his grandfather known about the *Tikun haKelali*, he would have had spiritual assistance in the form of a *Shiryon* (see section 5.3.2.2) to protect him, and he would not have died trying to ‘sweeten’ *Sabbatianism* (Liebes 1995:92). R. Nachman writes that the two *Frankist* disputations in Kamenets-Podolsk (1757) and Levov (1759) left “two holes in his [i.e., the Baal Shem Tov’s] heart” and eventually killed him because he could not ‘fix’ them. R. Nachman continues, referring to his great-grandfather, that “if the *tzaddik* of the generation lacks the ability to mitigate them...then he can fall greatly from his level...Or, this might cause him to pass away altogether” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. 1, Lesson 207:2, 1985:112b). Michaelson (2022:191) writes that this “was to be part of Rabbi Nachman’s mission: to succeed in sweetening the heretical words, as the Baal Shem Tov could not.”

⁴⁸⁴ This is based on the story R. Nachman told that begins with the statement: “When one goes into battle one wears a *Shiryon* (armour).” R. Nachman said: “The meaning of this story of the *Shiryon* (armour) must be kept secret and not revealed to anyone other than select individuals” (Translation is mine) (R. Avraham Hazan, *Yemei haTelaot*, 1932:193) (See section 5.3.2.2).

to himself in a similar *military term*, namely, as one of the *Maginei Eretz* (מגיני ארץ), or ‘*protectors of the land*,’

הָיָה מְשִׁיחַ עֲמָנוּ מִעֲנֵי הַמְּגִנֵּי אֶרֶץ שְׁקָרָא אוֹתָנוּ הַזֶּקֶן הַיָּדוּעַ וְכוּ'

“And he [R. Nachman] spoke to us concerning the matter of *Maginei Eretz* [the protectors of the land] which [is what] the well-known old man [the *Shpole Zeida*] had called us [Breslovers]” (R. Natan Sternharz, *Chayei Moharan*, Vol. 1, Lesson 38 (41⁴⁸⁵), 1874:7).⁴⁸⁶

Liebes (1995:94), building on Piekartz (1972:71-76),⁴⁸⁷ points out the parallel between the theurgic protection of both military concepts of *Shiryon* (*armour*) and *Maginei Eretz* (*protectors of the land*). In Liebes’ view, both concepts relate to *Tikun haKelali* as a protective ‘antidote’ to *Sabbatianism/Frankism*. The *Shpole Zeida* had referred to the *Breslovers* as *Maginei Eretz*, which was a known derogatory designation for the *Frankists* – after the *Frankist* debate in 1759 which opened with a reference to *Maginei Eretz*. Its original usage in opening the debate was not at all derogatory as it related to an earlier 1692 edition of a section of the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Code of Law* by R. Yosef Karo).⁴⁸⁸ Subsequently, however, it assumed a derogatory connotation and was used to refer to *Frankists* (Green 1992:127).⁴⁸⁹ Liebes (1995:94) claims R. Nachman well understood this innuendo and specifically referred to himself as one of the *Maginei Eretz*, adopting the common mystical strategy of parallelism in *Sabbatian* theology to

⁴⁸⁵ Some later editions have it as Lesson 41.

⁴⁸⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁸⁷ Piekartz was the first to suggest the explanation for the *Shpole Zeida*’s reference to the *Breslovers* as *Maginei Eretz* as stemming from the earlier *Frankist* debates which open with those words. This derogatory designation subliminally connected R. Nachman with the *Frankists*.

⁴⁸⁸ *Maginei Eretz* is a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim*, containing the work of two commentators, *Magen Avraham* and *Magen David* (hence *Maginei*, in the plural).

⁴⁸⁹ Considering the nuances of language and religious politics at that time, the term *Maginei Eretz* carried a strong connotation of *Sabbatianism* and *Frankism*. It was used by the *Frankists* who accused the Jews of using Christian blood in their wine on Passover. The *Frankists* opened their argument for their blood libel with a quote from the *Halachic* work “*Maginei Eretz*,” which deals with wine on Passover (*Maginei Eretz*, *Siman* 472, *Seif*, 12). This way, those in that era and milieu would have immediately recognised the *Shpole Zeida*’s innuendo linking R. Nachman to the *Frankists* and *Sabbatians* (Liebes 1995:94).

‘fix’ their very blemish with the cause of the blemish. This ‘parallelism’ is known as דרך ההידמות (*the path of juxtaposition*). This may be why:

“[t]he meaning...of the Shiryon (armour) must be kept secret and not revealed” (R. Avraham Hazan, *Yemei haTelaot*, 1932:193).

By 1802, the *Shpole Zeida* tried to rally other important rabbis to act against R. Nachman. According to Green (1992:110), it is unclear whether the *Shpole Zeida* was looking for an outright ex-communication or just a denunciation:

“If we are to believe Bratslav sources, the attempt was an utter failure” (Green 1992:110).

The *Breslov* sources claim the plan backfired and instead of support for the ban, the *Shpole Zeida* received only praise and support for R. Nachman. Then R. Nachman, using the same tactics of the *Shpole Zeida* – but against him – tried to excommunicate the *Shpole Zeida*. R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev was drawn in but refused to issue a ban against the *Shpole Zeida* in his city. Apparently, R. Levi Yitzchak’s wife received large amounts of money from the *Shpole Zeida* to support the poor of Berdichev (R. Avraham Hazan, *Avaneha Barzel*, Lesson 28, 1934:32-3)

Liebes dramatically develops the would-be ban that R. Nachman wanted to impose on the *Shpole Zeida* into more than just a ban. The battle between both parties was more than a turf war. It concerned the accusation of *Sabbatianism*. The matter took on a life of its own and went beyond the domains of the rabbinic world and involved the government authorities. Liebes suggests that R. Nachman bribed the authorities and this led the *Shpole Zeida* to view the attack on him by R. Nachman as equivalent to the ‘*Frankist* blood libel’ (Liebes 1995:94).⁴⁹⁰

Liebes (1995:95) goes even further and takes the view that R. Nachman attempted to quieten the *Shpole Zeida* by additionally involving ‘extra-governmental’ assistance, by invoking the theurgic use of the *Tikun haKelali* as the *Shiryon* (armour) for the battle against the *Shpole Zeida* and his perceived role in preventing the

⁴⁹⁰ During the Levov debate with the *Frankists* in 1759, the *Frankists* accused and ‘confirmed’ the trope of the blood libel where Jews were accused of using Christian blood to bake unleavened bread before Passover. Unfortunately, in this case with the *Frankists*, “it was not the first time that Jews had invoked the blood libel against their fellow Jews” (Michaelson 2022:21).

redemption. Since this *battle royale* fundamentally pivoted around accusations of *Sabbatianism*, the references to the 'Frankist blood libel' and *Maginei Eretz*, and the counterattack using the *Shiryon* (armour) of the *Tikun haKelali* become very important and symbolic weapons.

It is significant to note that, as Green (1992:207) points out, in around 1805/6 when R. Nachman's messianic activity peaked, he simultaneously instituted his three-stage strategy of recitation of *Tikun Chatzot* (midnight lamentation for the destruction of the Temple), the observance of private penitential fasts, and the recitation of his *Tikun haKelali*. It was also around this time that the quarrel with the *Shpole Zeida* grew most intense (Green 1992:112). It does appear that all these events were related.

It must be noted that Liebes (1995:96) does acknowledge that there is no hard evidence for this notion of R. Nachman paying a bribe to the authorities to harm the *Shpole Zeida*. However, the following remarkable extract from R. Nachman's own words is significant. It can be read as a veiled reference to the battle with the *Shpole Zeida* and as a justification for paying a bribe to harm him:

אַרְצ־יִשְׂרָאֵל הִיא אַחַת מִשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים שֶׁבָּאִים עַל־יְדֵי יִסּוּרִין (ברכות ה), וְעַקֵּר
הַיִּסּוּרִים הֵם הַמוֹנְעִים הָרָשָׁעִים, מוֹצִיאֵי דְבַת הָאָרֶץ

"The Land of Israel [=messianic redemption] is one of three things that are only acquired through suffering. The suffering is essentially from the evil detractors, 'who gave an evil report about the land' (Numbers 14:37) ..."

וְצָרִיד לְהַכְנִיעַ מִתְחִלָּה אֱלֹו הָרָשָׁעִים וְלַעֲנֹשׁ אוֹתָם בְּחֶרֶב וּבְקֶטֶל, וְעַל־יְדֵי־זֶה יִכּוּלִין
אַחֲר־כֵּן לֵילֵךְ לְאַרְצ־יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְכֵן הַזֶּה לַעֲנֹשׁ אֶת הָרָשָׁעִים אִי אִפְשָׁר, אֲלֵא בְּשִׁמְקִבְלִין
אֶת הַכֹּחַ הַזֶּה מֵאֲדוֹם

"The first thing required is the subjugation of these evil people, and to punish them with the sword and with death...Only after that can we go to the Land of Israel. But the punishment of the evil ones can only be achieved when this power is received from Edom [=Christian authorities] ..."

כְּמוֹ עֲכָשׁוּ בְּגִלוּת, שְׂאִין לָנוּ כֹּחַ לַעֲנֹשׁ בְּעֶצְמָנוּ אֶת הָרָשָׁעִים אֲלֵא בְּדִינָהֶם, בְּבַחֲיִנַת
(חבקות א':ד'): רָשָׁע מְכַתִּיר אֶת הַצִּדִּיק, עַל כֵּן יֵצֵא מִשְׁפָּט מֵעֵקֶל; כִּי הָרָשָׁע מְסַבֵּב

אֶת הַצַּדִּיק, וְאִין לָנוּ כַּח בְּעֶצְמֵנוּ לְדַחוֹת אוֹתוֹ אֶלָּא בְּמִשְׁפָּטֵיהֶם, לְדוֹן אוֹתוֹ בְּדִינֵיהֶם
וּלְקַבֵּל מֵהֶם כַּח לְרֹדֶף אֶת הָרָשָׁע.

“This is the reality of our current exile where we no longer have the ability to punish the wicked by ourselves. We can only proceed through their [the gentiles’] laws. This is in accordance with ‘Because the evil man usurps the righteous man, and the judgement goes out crooked’ (Habakkuk 1:4).⁴⁹¹ The evil man surrounds the Tzadik, and we do not have the means to repel him unless we go through the [the gentile] courts where he will be judged by their laws so that we receive from them the authority to punish the evil one ...”

הַצַּדִּיק הוּא מוֹצִיא אוֹתוֹ מִבֵּין הַקְּלָפוֹת, וְיוֹצֵא הַמִּשְׁפָּט מֵעֲקוּלוֹ...וְעֵכָשׁ הוּא יוֹצֵא
מֵעֲקוּלוֹ וְנִתְיָשֵׁר מֵעֲקוּלוֹ

“The Tzadik takes the judgement away from the forces of evil and [of necessity] ‘the judgement goes out crooked’ (Habakkuk 1:4) is now read as] ‘the judgment goes out from its crookedness’ [and is no longer considered crooked]...Now the judgement has gone out of its crookedness and has been straightened out” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. 1, Lesson 20, 1985:28b).⁴⁹²

⁴⁹¹ JPS translates this verse as “*For villains hedge in those whose cause is just.*” I have translated מְכַתִּיר, which literally means to ‘coronate,’ as ‘usurp.’ This is because in the context of the *Shpole Zeida*’s threat towards R. Nachman, this may have been how R. Nachman would have interpreted this verse to permit the use of ‘crookedness’ under these threatening circumstances. Bear in mind that the *Shpole Zeida*’s charge of *Sabbatianism* levelled against R. Nachman could have potentially dealt a crippling blow to the movement. The first part of that same verse, although not quoted in R. Nachman’s excerpt, reads: עַל־כֵּן תִּפְּוֹג תּוֹרָה, “*That is why decision fails*” (JPS). More literally, it means ‘*That is why Torah fails.*’ Some translations use “*Therefore the law is paralyzed*” (NIV). The tenor of this verse clearly suggests a perceived threat to a system of “law” or “Torah,” almost ‘paralysing’ it. In the *Chassidic* context, to this day, the term *Torah* does not just refer to the *Pentateuch*, but to the unique teachings of specific *Chassidic* sects. In my understanding, R. Nachman would have used this verse describing a threat from a perceived evil man (the *Shpole Zeida*) to the *Torah* (the *unique teachings*) of the nascent *Breslover Chassidim* – and on the authority of the biblical verse, under such circumstances, *crookedness* (i.e., *a bribe to a gentile court*) was in order. It must be noted that the general practice of using a biblical text completely out of its historical and traditional context was a well-developed and common *Chassidic* innovation. Idel refers to this interpretive style as “*Hermeneutics in Hasidism.*” Taken to an extreme, according to R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, the *Tzadikim* “*now have the power to interpret the Torah in the way they like*’ even if in heaven this interpretation is not accepted” (Idel 2010:14).

⁴⁹² Translation and square brackets are mine.

R. Nachman continuous with lengthy interpretations of the biblical story (Numbers 20:19) about travelling through Edom [=gentile courts], and finds a justification – under these extenuating circumstances – for paying a bribe:

וְנָתַתִּי מִכָּרֶם – תְּרֻמוֹ: אֵת דְּמִיהוֹן, הֵינּוּ הַשָּׂחַד שֶׁמִּקְבְּלִין, וְצָרִיד לָתֵן לָהֶם מָמוֹן, כְּדִי
לְהוֹצִיא מִשִּׁפְט מִן הָעֵקוֹל בְּרָצוֹנָם

“‘I will pay the full price’ (Numbers 20:19) – Onkelos translates this as, ‘their money’ which refers to the bribes [to be paid to gentile courts]. One needs to give them money in order for them to willingly take the judgement from its crookedness” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. 1, Lesson 20:9, 1985:29a).⁴⁹³

Liebes (1995:96) interprets these passages from R. Nachman’s *Likutei Moharan* as strong indications that he may indeed have bribed the authorities to harm the *Shpole Zeida*. Liebes argues that it is unlikely that R. Nachman would have developed such an intricate and elaborate hermeneutic web including the promotion of bribery, unless he had to justify such an action in reality. To strengthen Liebes’ position we can now understand why the *Shpole Zeida* cynically referred to the *Breslovers* as *Maginei Eretz* (*protectors of the land*) because they believed they were protecting the land=messianism (referenced in the first excerpt above) by subduing the enemy – the *Shpole Zeida* himself (Liebes 1995:96). In other words, because the stakes were so high after the *Shpole Zeida* had accused R. Nachman of *Sabbatianism* and thereby threatening the future of the nascent *Breslover* movement and holding up the redemption, unusual methods were justified to neutralise the threat.

5.3.2.1 Alleged *Sabbatian* parallels in R. Nachman’s work

There were points of contact and synchronous and symmetrical associations between R. Nachman’s *Tikun haKelali* and a similar work bearing the same title,⁴⁹⁴ by R. Natan of Gaza, Shabbatai Tzvi’s ‘prophet’. Liebes assertively proclaims:

מקור התיקון הכללי, תיקון השבתאות, הוא עצמו שבתאי

⁴⁹³ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁹⁴ The National Library of Israel, Manuscript 15° 8°, 112a; 120b; 121a.

“The source of [R. Nachman’s] *Tikun haKelali* – the rectification for Sabbatianism – is in itself [completely] Sabbatian” (Liebes 1995:99).⁴⁹⁵

The messianic fervour inspired by Shabbatai Tzvi just prior to 1666, was rooted in the penitential and repentance movement created by R. Natan of Gaza. Repentance was a prerequisite to the messianic revelation (Scholem 1987:251). While this movement did include *personal* repentance, it focused primarily on the repentance and *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) of the Jewish *nation* as a whole. Thus, R. Natan of Gaza’s *Tikun* was not just a private enterprise but rather a *Tikun haKelali*, or ‘General *Tikun*’ for the people. In fact, R. Natan of Gaza called his *Tikun*, ‘*Tikun haKelali*,’ to emphasise the collective (*Kelali*) aspect of the repentance and rectifications (Liebes 1995:99-100).⁴⁹⁶

R. Natan of Gaza and the *Sabbatians* emphasised the general ‘fixing’ of the nation (*Tikun Gamur*) over individual attempts at individual rectification. This was because they taught that the souls of the entire nation were contained within the soul of Shabbatai Tzvi who represented a spiritual synthesis of the nation. Liebes (1995:104) notes that a surprisingly similar idea was also presented by R. Nachman who constantly emphasised that he was the *Tzadik haDor* (the greatest *Tzadik* of the generation) if not the greatest *Tzadik* ever and that the *Tikun* of the nation depended on the personal *Tikun* of the *Tzadik haDor*.

R. Natan of Gaza writes that the older forms of *Tikun* had become obsolete:

אין לעשות התיקון [של קבלת האר"י] ולבכות על גלות השכינה כאשר היינו עושים,
אלא התיקון שתיקן אמיר"ה [=שבתי צבי] כאשר הוא מפורסם לך

⁴⁹⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁹⁶ Liebes (1995:100) claims that the title of R. Natan of Gaza’s work – ‘*Tikun haKelali*’ – had never been used before. On a technical point, Liebes (1995:100, footnote 136) notes that he did find one other reference to the regimen of *Tikun* as suggested by the R. Yitzchak Luria, that was indeed called *Tikun haKelali*. However, it was none other than R. Natan of Gaza who retroactively referred to that spiritual program as *Tikun haKelali*! On the other hand, Moshe Idel (2013a:218, footnote 72) challenges Liebes on his claim that the title ‘*Tikun haKelali*’ had never been used before the time of R. Natan of Gaza, and writes: “See, however, the occurrence of this phrase in several Lurianic texts authored by kabbalists like R. Immanuel Hay Richi...and in two manuscripts of the pre-Sabbatean famous kabbalist R. Nathan Shapira of Jerusalem...” Although Liebes may have been mistaken on the notion that the title ‘*Tikun haKelali*’ had never been used before the time of R. Natan of Gaza, I suggest that Liebes’ general argument that R. Nachman drew on R. Natan of Gaza, still maintains its integrity due to other convincing similarities between both works, as we shall see.

“...one should no longer perform the *Tikun* [‘spiritual rectification’ of the Ari Zal] and cry over the exile of the *Shechina* as we used to do, but rather [we must now perform] the *Tikun* established by *Amirah* [=Shabbatai Tzvi] as you know it” (R. Natan of Gaza, *Derush haTaninim*, 1944:15).

The exact same titles of R. Natan of Gaza’s *Sabbatian Tikun haKelali* and R. Nachman’s *Chassidic Tikun haKelali* were not the only commonalities shared between the two works. The essential theology behind both these books was that sexual sins include all other sins in their orbit – and by ‘fixing’ (i.e., the *Tikun* of) sexual sins, one can ‘fix’ all other sins as well.

R. Natan of Gaza writes in a style that was later to be mirrored in R. Nachman’s *Tikun haKelali*:

מי שירצה לעשות תיקון כללי על כל עוונותיו... והאדם שרוצה לתקן עצמו, קודם כל צריך לתקן הפגם שפגם באות ברית קודש שענשו חמור מאוד... הם תיקון גמור

“If one wishes to perform a complete remedy [Tikun Kelali] for all one’s sins...and if a person wants to fix (letaken=tikun) himself, he first has to fix the blemish [he caused] with the sign of the covenant [brit=circumcision],⁴⁹⁷ which carries the most severe punishment...This is a total remedy [tikun gamur]” (The National Library of Israel, Manuscript 15° 8°, 112a; 120b; 121a).⁴⁹⁸

R. Nachman instituted the recitation of *ten specific* psalms in his *Tikun haKelali*. On the other hand, R. Natan of Gaza established *thirty unspecified* psalms. By comparison, R. Natan of Gaza’s thirty psalms comprised three sections, each containing ten psalms (ten, corresponding to the mystical world of *Asiya*, ten corresponding to *Yetzira*, and another ten corresponding to both of them as they rise into *Beriya*).⁴⁹⁹ The unit of ten thus dominates both systems of psalms. While R. Natan of Gaza did not specify which particular psalms to recite, R. Nachman also did not

⁴⁹⁷ A euphemism for sexual sins.

⁴⁹⁸ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁴⁹⁹ Classical *Kabbalah* refers to four worlds or cosmic planes of existence (in descending order: *Atzilut*, *Beriya*, *Yetzira*, and *Asiya*). This concept became particularly widespread under the influence of *Lurianic Kabbalah* (Idel 2013b:307, footnote 20).

specify which particular psalms to recite until four years into the project (Liebes 1995:103).

The notion of reciting multiple psalms for purposes of spiritual rectification was not always an accepted practice. Besides a tenth-century example of the theurgic use of psalms (Michal 2022b:107), in more recent times the theurgic recitation of psalms began with Shabbatai Tzvi and his students. It was considered an improvement on the previous *Lurianic Kabbalistic* notion that many *Mishnaot*⁵⁰⁰ should be recited for purposes of *Tikun*. That was because the word *Mishna* contained the same Hebrew letters as the word *Neshama* (soul) (Liebes 1995:103, footnote 141). In this sense, R. Nachman – knowingly or otherwise – built more upon the redemptive and rectification methodology of R. Natan of Gaza and Shabbatai Tzvi, than on the Ari and *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

During the era of Shabbatai Tzvi, R. Yisrael Hazan wrote a *Sabbatian* commentary on the Book of Psalms. His commentary is replete with alleged references to Shabbatai Tzvi within the psalms. However, he was against the fairly common practice of apostasy that was practised by Jews in the aftermath of Shabbatai Tzvi's conversion to Islam because he said they could no longer be included in the *Tikun haKelali* (general remedy) of R. Natan of Gaza. He believed that R. Natan of Gaza – who, interestingly, is referred to as 'Moharan', just like R. Nachman was called 'Moharan'⁵⁰¹ – essentially affected a *Tikun* for Shabbatai Tzvi who, in the *Sabbatian* conceptualisation, contained the souls of the entire nation (Liebes 1995:104). R. Yisrael Hazan writes:

ומכאן תבין גדולת מוהר"ן [=נתן העזתי] שהחזיר את יש[ראל] לאביהם שבשמים
 בתשובה שלימה...ועתה הסכלים האלה [=אלה שהמירו דתם בעקבות שבתי צבי...]
 הם מרעים לנפשותם לבד כי לא יוכלו עוד להתקרב בתיקון הכללי הגדול שנתקן

"From here we see the greatness of Moharan [=R. Natan of Gaza] who brought Israel back to their father in heaven, through an all-encompassing repentance [Teshuva Shleima]...But these fools [who converted out of Judaism as a result of Shabbatai Tzvi's apostasy to Islam] have only damaged themselves because they can no longer

⁵⁰⁰ *Mishnaot* is the plural of *Mishna*.

⁵⁰¹ *Moharan* can serve as an acronym for both *Moreinu haRav* (our Master and Rabbi) *Natan/Nachman*.

be included in the *Tikun haKelali* [general remedy] established [by R. Natan of Gaza]” (R. Yisrael Hazan, *Pirush Mizmorei Tehilim*, Scholem 1952:201).⁵⁰²

Besides indicating how well-known the *Sabbatian* concept of *Tikun haKelali* was, this commentary suggests that by fixing the sins of the leader, the sins of the whole nation are fixed as well. Both R. Natan of Gaza and R. Nachman used formulations of psalms innovatively, not just as a remedy for individual transgressions, but as a *Tikun haKelali*, or *general remedy* for the entire nation. However, the genesis of this idea is essentially *Sabbatian*:

התיקון הכללי...פיתח ר' נחמן מכתבי נתן העזתי או מגלגוליהם בספרות השבתאים

“R. Nachman developed his *Tikun haKelali* from the writings of Natan of Gaza or derivations thereof within *Sabbatian* literature” (Liebes 1995:105).

Supporting the essentially *Sabbatian* context in which the expression ‘*Tikun haKelali*’ was generally used, is an example found in the writings of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto who, as we saw earlier (see section 3.1.10), was also suspected of *Sabbatian* leanings. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto used the expression of *Tikun haKelali* in a clearly ‘futuristic’ sense (העתיד לבא) even adding the word גמור (*complete*) to the word כללי (*general*) for emphasis. This *future, universal and inclusive* (i.e., *messianic*) nature of this new style of *Tikun*, was remarkably similar to the way R. Natan of Gaza intended it:

לתקנם התיקון הכללי והגמור העתיד לבא

“...to rectify them with the future [concept of the] general and complete remedy [*Tikun haKelali vahaGamur*]” (R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Daat Tevunot*, Ch. 48, 2001b:95).

The hypothesis that R. Nachman may have based his *Tikun haKelali* on the *Tikun haKelali* of R. Natan of Gaza, is further bolstered by the fact that R. Nachman

⁵⁰² Translation is mine. Square brackets in the Hebrew text are Liebes’. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Scholem includes R. Yisrael Hazan commentary entitled *Pirush Mizmorei Tehilim* in an appendix to the quoted work.

acknowledges that his *Tikun haKelali* is only completing the work started by unnamed others before him. R. Nachman states:

וְכַמָּה וְכַמָּה צַדִּיקִים גְּדוֹלִים שָׁרְצוּ לַעֲמֹד עַל עֲגִיזָה זֶה וְנִתְּנָה לָמְצָא לְזֶה תִּקּוּן גָּמוּר...
וְקִצְתָם הִתְחִילוּ לִידַע קֶצֶת בְּעֲגִיזָה זֶה, וְנִסְתַּלְקוּ לְעוֹלָמָם בְּאֶמְצָע עֶסְקָם בְּזֶה וְלֹא
גָּמְרוּ, וְלִי עֹזֶר הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרֵךְ שֶׁזִּכֵּיתִי לַעֲמֹד עַל זֶה בְּשִׁלְמוֹת.

“Many great Tzadikim tried to understand this matter and worked to find a Tikun Gamur [complete spiritual remedy] Some began to understand a little about this matter of *Tikun*, but they departed this world in the middle of their work and did not complete the task. But God...assisted me to merit and achieve this task with perfection” (R. Nachman in Sternharz, *Sichot haRan*, Ch 141, 1989:142).⁵⁰³

One wonders who R. Nachman is referring to, and who else was working on a תִּקּוּן גָּמוּר (*Tikun Gamur*, an all-encompassing and *General rectification*) since this idea was rather novel and uncommon, except in its *Sabbatian* formulation. In this excerpt, R. Nachman also uses the same unusual expression, תִּקּוּן גָּמוּר (*General Rectification*) that was used by R. Natan of Gaza as quoted earlier.⁵⁰⁴

As if to avoid any risky and synchronous association between R. Nachman and R. Natan of Gaza, it seems that the *Breslover* writers went out of their way to overstate the claim, and create an image, of total and absolute novelty surrounding the *Tikun haKelali* as an innovation and exclusive invention of R. Nachman:

וְעֲגִיזָה זֶה, עַל-יְדֵי אֲמִירַת הָעֶשְׂרֵה קַפִּיטָל תְּהִלִּים הַנִּ"ל, הוּא דְּבַר חֲדָשׁ לְגַמְרִי,
חֲדוּשׁ גָּפֵל...שֶׁהֵם תִּקּוּן חֲדָשׁ לְגַמְרִי וְלֹא יָדַע מִזֶּה שׁוּם נִבְרָא מִיְּמֹת עוֹלָם

“This matter of the Tikun, through the recital of these ten psalms, is absolutely new and an excellent innovation... a novel Tikun entirely, and no one knew about this since the beginning of the time” (R. Natan Sternharz, *Sichot haRan*, Ch 141, 1989:142,144).⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰³ Translation is mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that R. Nachman's statement is recorded by R. Natan Sternharz.

⁵⁰⁴ As found in The National Library of Israel, Manuscript 15° 8°, 112a; 120b; 121a.

⁵⁰⁵ It is, of course, possible to read this ‘innovation’ as referring only to the specific *Ten Psalms* as selected by R. Nachman. However, from the general presentation, the text seems to be intent on conveying the idea that the ‘general remedy’ had no precedent at all, and certainly was not a development based on R. Natan of Gaza or anyone else for that matter.

On the one hand, we see R. Nachman admitting that he had perfected the work of the *Tikun Gamur* (*General Rectification*) that was started and attempted by those unnamed individuals before him. On the other hand, and within the same Lesson 141, we see the strong insistence by R. Nachman's followers that this *tikun* was an absolutely original work. This leads Liebes (1995:108) to conclude that, there must have been people during the time of R. Nachman who knew about the *Tikun haKelali* of R. Natan of Gaza, who raised their concerns and suspicions that the two similar works might be equated. This would have prompted a vehement defence by the *Breslover* followers to declare the work a novel and original idea without any precedent – despite R. Nachman himself admitting it was not entirely original.

Besides some possible parallel associations between R. Nachman's *Tikun haKelali* and R. Natan of Gaza's *Tikun haKelali*, another major work by R. Nachman also raises some similar questions. R. Nachman's *magnum opus*, *Likutei Moharan*, corresponds to a work by R. Natan of Gaza, also entitled *Likutei Moharan*. The exact replication of titles of two major works seems to be more than coincidental – and especially surprising in a world where *Sabbatianism* was still very much alive, and where most rabbis were doing their utmost to disassociate themselves from any visible signs of parallelism to the official movement of *Sabbatian* heresy.

In addition to the apparent parallels between R. Nachman and R. Natan of Gaza in their respective works of *Tikun haKelali* and *Likutei Moharan*, covered above, Liebes (1995:109) further shows numerous surprising parallels between R. Nachman's famous stories, and similar stories to be found in the earlier work by Jacob Frank, titled *Divrei haAdon*. Some of these original tales by Jacob Frank were “*subsequently retold by Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav*” (Michaelson 2022:39).

“[There is] strong evidence linking Frank's teachings and Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who described himself as being able to ‘sweeten’ the teachings of heretics” (Michaelson 2022:11).

Michaelson maintains that this ‘mystical plagiarism’ is the result of the schema of R. Nachman, where *Sabbatianism* represented not only the greatest evil but also the greatest potential; and he was determined to succeed in affecting the *Tikun* and eventually “*to succeed in sweetening the heretical words, as the Baal Shem Tov could not.*”

Another way R. Nachman seemed to have mirrored the *Sabbatians* and *Frankists* was by adopting some unusual behavioural practices. The many instances of R. Nachman behaving in a state of קטנות (*spiritual 'smallness'*) when he pretended he was “a small child or a fool,” resembled Shabbatai Tzvi’s “*strange acts*” and Jacob Frank’s “*holy madness*” (Michaelson 2022:192). In the case of R. Nachman acting foolish, we find that:

כִּי הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה בְּסִטְנָבוּל כָּל מִינֵי קִטְנוּת, וְהָיָה הוֹלֵךְ יָחַף וּבְלִי חֲגוּרָה וּבְלִי כּוּבַע עָלָיו,
וְהָיָה מְלַבֵּשׁ רַק בֵּה"א אֶנְטֶר-שְׁלֹאק"

“[w]hen he was in Istanbul, he did all sorts of ‘smallness’ [foolish] acts, like walking barefoot, without a girdle, without an upper hat and wearing only his inner garment” (R. Natan Sternharz, *Shivchei haRan*, Ch 12, 1989:43).⁵⁰⁶

These “*strange acts*” may be connected to the *Sabbatian* notion of *Mindless Light*, or *אור שאין בו מחשבה* (*light that has no thought*) (see section 2.2.6 *The Messiah's*). Zvi Mark (2009:185-97), does not consider these ‘*childish*,’ ‘*strange*’ and ‘*mad*’ acts, to be particularly significant because they were already typologically present in earlier *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Mark thereby weakens the argument that these “*strange acts*” and antinomian innovations of the *Sabbatians* were copied by R. Nachman and the *Chassidim*. Instead, these “*strange acts*” are reflections of states of being referred to in *Lurianic Kabbalah* as קטנות (*spiritual 'smallness'*) which is the opposing and vacillating component of גדלות (*spiritual 'greatness'*). By performing these unusual and foolish acts in a state of ‘*smallness*,’ one descends to the lowest common denominator of humanity – so that when one later rises to a higher state of ‘*greatness*,’ others on the lower levels can be indirectly elevated at the same time. Intentionally descending into those states of ‘*smallness*’ is, therefore conceptualised as a necessary prerequisite for the betterment of society and even the cosmos, since humankind is a microcosm (עולם קטן) of the universe.⁵⁰⁷ Mark refers to Liebes (1967:14) who shows

⁵⁰⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁰⁷ The idea of a person as a microcosm of the entire universe is not only a mystical concept, but is a well-known metaphor in general rabbinic literature. (See Introduction to *Agadat Olam Katan*. Online source:

that these ideas of ‘*smallness* and ‘*greatness*’ were indeed prefigured in *Lurianic Kabbalah* and therefore not innovations of *Sabbatians* or *Chassidim*. Liebes (1967:14, footnote 77) brings examples to show the pre-existence of these concepts in *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

However, the attempt to juxtapose *Chassidic* teachings directly with *Lurianic Kabbalah* is not always a simple matter. Moshe Idel (2010:11) shows how in *Lurianic Kabbalah*, ‘*smallness*’ relates to God’s name *Elo-him*, while ‘*greatness*’ is affiliated with the Tetragrammaton, but that’s where the similarity stops because:

“[w]e may discern a shift from the manner in which the two terms have been used in Lurianic material and Hasidism...Hasidic masters turned the two terms into a scheme that shapes the understanding of two main modes of worship. This is done in a manner that has no parallel in Lurianism” (Idel 2010:11).

Idel’s explanation that *Lurianic Kabbalah* did not promote these ideas as practical “*modes of worship*,” seems to counter the objection of Mark that the “*strange acts*” of Shabbatai Tzvi, Jacob Frank and R. Nachman were simply reflections of earlier *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

As I understand the *Lurianic* sources – as per Liebes (1967:14, footnote 77) – while they do speak about ‘*smallness*’ as a state of spiritual exile, they do *not* resemble the extreme and radical ‘*smallness*’ which demands intentional and self-imposed ‘*strangeness*,’ ‘*madness*’ and ‘*foolishness*’ that we see in the examples from Shabbatai Tzvi, Jacob Frank and R. Nachman respectively. Thus, this later methodology encouraging intentional acts of ‘*foolishness*’ appears to be a unique formulation, albeit rooted etymologically in an older broader concept. These acts of ‘*foolishness*,’ and their direct correspondence and successive parallelism incorporating *Sabbatianism*, *Frankism* and *Chassidism*, are therefore worthy of further investigation as to the reason for their unusual symmetry.

R. Nachman, surprisingly, replicated Jacob Frank in other ways as well. Both told stories that were later recorded in book form. R. Nachman’s stories were recorded by his student, R. Natan Sternharz, in a work entitled *Sipurei Maasiot*. Jacob Frank’s

https://www.sefaria.org/Otzar_Midrashim%2C_Agadat_Olam_Katan%2C_Introduction.1?lang=bi. Retrieved 17 April 2024.)

stories appear in a work entitled *Divrei haAdon*.⁵⁰⁸ R. Nachman's tale of the exchanged children (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Sipurei Maasiot*, Story 11, 1881:89) – where the queen's child and the bondmaid's child were exchanged at birth – reflects a similar motif of the separation of a boy and girl who were destined for each other, which is common in the writings of Jacob Frank (Jacob Frank, *Divrei haAdon*, story 1021).⁵⁰⁹

R. Nachman is well known for his story of the prince who lost his mind and thought he was a turkey. He sat under the table. The prince was finally healed by a man who pretended he was also a turkey and who joined him under the table. Slowly the man influenced the prince to behave more like a human, pretending that turkeys also adopt human-like behaviours, and eventually, the turkey/prince rose from under the table (R. Nachman of Breslov, in Avraham Hazan, *Kochvei Or*, 1972:26-7).⁵¹⁰ A strikingly similar story about a man who lost his mind and behaved like a turkey is also to be found in Jacob Frank's *Divrei haAdon* (Jacob Frank, *Divrei haAdon*, story 986).⁵¹¹ These similarities raise:

“the tantalizing question of how Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav came into contact with the tale, whether in a manuscript...which was seemingly intended only for a small group of Frank's closest disciples, or in some other form” (Michaelson 2022:196).

Michaelson (2022:196) suggests that the imagery of the story about the man who pretended he was a turkey might have been a veiled symbol of R. Nachman 'pretending' to be a *Sabbatian* so that he could enter the realm of *Sabbatian* heresy to raise it to the side of holiness. R. Nachman may have been alluding to this audacious plan of entering the heresy when he is recorded saying:

בְּשִׁמְשִׁבְרֵי אֶת הַכְּפִירוֹת, אָזִי "מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ". הֵינּוּ שְׂמוֹצְאִין אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ יִתְבָּרֵךְ גַּם בְּתוֹךְ
הַכְּפִירוֹת עֲצָמָן, כִּי גַם בְּהַכְּפִירוֹת בְּעֲצָמָן מְלַבֵּשׁ חַיִּיתוֹ יִתְבָּרֵךְ

⁵⁰⁸ The original work was entitled *Zbiór Słów Pańskich* (*Collection of the Words of the Lord*) (Michaelson 2022:2).

⁵⁰⁹ Online source: דברי האדון [יעקב פראנק] / אלמוניות, יעקב פרנק / פניה שלום - פרויקט בן-יהודה (benyehuda.org) Retrieved 17 March 2024.

⁵¹⁰ Regarding this citation it must be noted that R. Nachman's story about the turkey is recorded in the work *Kochvei Or*, by Avraham Hazan, under the section 'Stories and Parables of Rabbeinu Zal.'

⁵¹¹ Online source: דברי האדון [יעקב פראנק] / אלמוניות, יעקב פרנק / פניה שלום - פרויקט בן-יהודה (benyehuda.org) Retrieved 17 March 2024.

“When one smashes this heresy, then the King is in [the shards]. This means that one can salvage the King even from the heresy itself because even in the heresy is [to be found] His life-giving energy” (R Natan Sternharz, *Sichot haRan*, Ch 102, 1989:108).⁵¹²

Two points strike me about this interesting, if not revealing, teaching. The first is that it begins with a quotation from Numbers (23:21): לֹא הִבִּיט אֶן בֵּיעָקֵב, “*He beholds no sin in Jacob.*” In the probable context of breaking the heresy of *Jacob Frank*, the reference to God beholding “*no sin in Jacob,*” seems an appropriate introduction to this daring spiritual strategy. Secondly, the narrator, R. Natan Sternharz, is quick to point out that: אֲבָל שְׂכַחְתִּי הָעֵנִין. אֲךָ זֹאת אֲנִי זֹכֵר, “*I have forgotten this matter, but what I do remember is...*” After reading about the “*smashing*” of this heresy to reveal the life-giving energy of King, within a possible *Frankist* context, one wonders whether R. Natan Sternharz knew more about his teacher’s stratagem than just the broad details he was able, or prepared, to remember. Michaelson certainly maintains that:

“The most remarkable case of Sabbateanism and Frankism in the writings and actions of a Hasidic master...is that of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav” (Michaelson 2022:191).

5.3.2.2 The *Shiryon* controversy

As noted in our earlier reference (see section 5.3.2) to R. Nachman’s *Tikun haKelali* as a *Shiryon* (*armour*), this concept significantly and counterintuitively appears to have its theological origins in R. Natan of Gaza (Liebes 1995:105). In a letter produced during the peak of the *Sabbatian* movement describing how R. Natan of Gaza was busy with the work of repentance, there is a reference to *Shiryon* in a uniquely *Sabbatian* phrase, שריון התשובה or “*armour of repentance*”:

ומי שלא יהיה לבוש בשריון התשובה [בה] כהוגן יעבור צרות ב"ם [=בר מינן]

⁵¹² Translation and square brackets are mine.

“And one who does not wear the Shiryon haTeshuva [armour of repentance] appropriately, will certainly endure travail, heaven forefend” (R. Natan of Gaza in Habermann 1940:211).⁵¹³

Liebes (1995:106) notes that he had not found any other parallels to the concept of *teshuva* (repentance) being so unusually described as a *Shiryon* (armour) – except those in the writings of both R. Natan of Gaza and R. Nachman. Liebes thus sees a strong *Sabbatian* connection and argues that R. Nachman had drawn upon R. Natan of Gaza and perpetuated the unique *Sabbatian* notion of *Shiryon* as an “armour of repentance.” R. Nachman then, as it were, donned the *Shiryon* (in the form of his selected *ten psalms*) for ‘protection’ as he ‘worked’ with, or ‘elevated,’ *Sabbatianism*.

R. Nachman told a story about the *Shiryon*, entitled *Maaseh miShiryon*, which he warned his followers not to reveal:

“The meaning of this story of the Shiryon must be kept secret and not revealed to anyone other than select individuals” (Hazan, *Yemei haTelaot*, 1932:193).⁵¹⁴

Research into this matter is very difficult, because, as Liebes (1995:108) reminds us, ideas like this, which included:

האשמות ר' נחמן בשבתאות צונזרו ולא נזכרו בכתבים הברסלביים האותנטיים

“the charges of Sabbatianism levelled against R. Nachman, were censored and not recorded in the official Breslover writings” (Liebes 1995:108).

Another mysterious work that was long thought to have disappeared, was *Megilat Setarim* (*The Scroll of Secrets*). In official *Breslover* writings, such as *Yemei Moharnat*, the ‘loss’ of the scroll is lamented:

⁵¹³ Translation is mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that R. Natan of Gaza's letter is recorded in Habermann's collection of *Sabbatian* letters.

⁵¹⁴ Translation is mine. See footnote 485. *Yemei haTelaot* [*Times of trouble*] was published three times but has effectively been removed from circulation and its record had been lost, or removed, from the National Library of Israel (at the time of Liebes' writing in 1995). A recent search, however, shows that the work is now referenced. Online source: https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990035778050205171/NLI. Retrieved 04 March 2024.

ואחר הסתלקותו הקדושה של הרב רבי נתן ז"ל בימים לא כביר נגנבו ונאבדו
הכתבים הקדושים של מגלת סתרים הנ"ל, ועדין לא נודע מקומם איו, וחבל על
דאבדין וכו'

"Following the untimely passing of R. Natan [Sternharz],⁵¹⁵ the holy writings of Megilat Setarim...were stolen and lost. It is still not known where they are; woe for that loss, etc." (R. Natan Sternharz, *Yemei Moharnat*, Section1:11, 2009:23).⁵¹⁶

Green (1992:20, note 5), however, makes mention of credible rumours that *Megilat Setarim* still existed in secret collections held exclusively by trusted *Breslover Chassidim*. It turns out that Green was correct because a few years later, some followers within the *Breslov* community approached Zvi Mark and informed him that *Megilat Setarim* did indeed still exist.

Around 2005, after returning from a pilgrimage trip to the gravesite of R. Nachman in Uman, Ukraine, Mark was finally considered trustworthy enough to view the hitherto and coveted Secret Scroll:

"I received the manuscripts of the Scroll from Breslav Chasidim. They came to me piecemeal and not all from the same individual" (Mark 2010:16).

Mark noticed that some sections seemed to be missing. He was right, they were missing, because various *Chassidim* owned different sections and copies of the Scroll. Soon other *Chassidim* also came forward and presented him with a fuller text:

"I was also able to read another late (and rather poor quality) manuscript, but I was not allowed to copy it myself. Thus it was of little help" (Mark 2010:16).

⁵¹⁵ R. Natan Sternharz was R. Nachman's closest disciple.

⁵¹⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine. It is possible that this extract, obviously recorded after the passing of R. Natan Sternharz, was added to throw those searching for *Megilat Setarim* off the trail. The expression "*stolen and lost*" (instead of *stolen or lost*) and the concluding inconsistent expression only referencing "*woe for that loss*," is interesting because it seems to imply that this author knew that there were multiple copies somewhere in circulation. Also, as Green (1992:209) has pointed out, the expression 'וכו', 'etc,' as we find in the abovementioned *Yemei Moharnat* extract, often indicates things that are known but not spoken about.

Eventually, Mark managed to locate an original, authentic manuscript of the Scroll. It was found in the private collection of R. Leibel Berger. Shaul Magid describes the essence of Mark's discovery as follows:

"Mark was able to decipher most of the scroll. What he discovered was something not unexpected but remarkable nonetheless...For example, the scrolls show that despite the insular nature of Chasidic pietism, Nachman viewed the role of the messiah (his role) as one who spent much of his time, perhaps most of his time, reaching out to non-Jews, in conversation and through teaching, in order to adequately prepare them for the messianic unfolding" (Magid in Mark 2010:10).⁵¹⁷

Ironically, the discovery and subsequent publication of *Megilat Setarim* was a disappointment and an anti-climax for many, as there were no ostensible or blatant references to *Sabbatianism* that many expected to find in the long-hidden secret texts. Mark had received and revealed other texts as well, including the elusive *Maaseh miShiryon*. After revealing the *Maaseh miShiryon* document, he writes conclusively:

"Now that the story [of the Shiryon] is revealed before us, we can conclude that there is no connection whatsoever between the *Maaseh miShiryon* and Sabbatianism or Frankism" (Mark 2011:205).

Thus, with the revelation and publication of *Megilat Setarim* and *Maaseh miShiryon* – both previously secret texts – it seems that the rumours of R. Nachman's clandestine forays into *Sabbatianism* were unfounded. After more than thirty years of Liebes' research on the *Shiryon* and his hypothesising on its *Sabbatian* connection and its serving as a *Tikkun* for *Sabbatianism*, it seemed that Liebes had overreacted and been mistaken (Liebes 2011:1).

But Liebes had not closed the book on *Sabbatian* influences on R. Nachman. Instead, he observed anomalies in the newly published *Maaseh miShiryon* text that no one else seemed to have noticed. Extracts from the hitherto unknown and once secret *Maaseh miShiryon* text and its commentary, follow:

⁵¹⁷ Regarding this citation it must be noted that Shaul Magid is writing an Introduction to *The Scroll of Secrets* by Zvi Mark.

כשהולכים במלחמה לובשים שריון...ואם יכונונו למקום שאין מגיע שם ...
השריון...אזי בוודאי יהרגוהו, אבל ע"י מה עושין שריון שכשיהרגוהו יחיה עוד, ואם
יהרגוהו עוד הפעם יחזור ויחיה

ענה הרב [ר' אהרן] ואמר שזה בחינת מצות יבום, ונענה לו ראשו הוא ז"ל [ר' נחמן]
כי היבום הוא שחוזר המת לחיות...כי נעשית אתתיה אמיה [אשתו אמו], וכמו
שכתוב בזוהר הקדוש וחוזר ובא לעולם כנודע

אבל השכל של זה הדבר ואיך לקיים זאת, כי יבום ממש אין נוהג עתה וצריך לקיים
...בבחינת בשורשו וכו' וכו'

ואמר כי יש אחד שעושה כלי נפלאה...אבל ענין זה הוא חידוש נפלא שאפילו לשון
...כזה לא נשמע מיום בריאת עולם

גם אמר אז שענין סיפור זה של השריון יהיה בסוד ולא יגלו כי אם ליחידי סגולה. אבל
ענין התיקון...של עשרה קאפיטיל תהלים יאמרו ויגלו בפני הכל

"When one goes into battle one wears a Shiryon (armour)...But if [the
enemy] aim [their weapons] at a place where the Shiryon does not
cover...they will surely kill you.

But how do you make a Shiryon that when they kill you, you will come
alive again; and then if they kill you once again, you will come alive
again[?]

R. [Aharon]⁵¹⁸ answered: This is the aspect of the commandment to
perform the Yibum [levirate marriage].⁵¹⁹ R. [Nachman] nodded his
head [in confirmation] because the Yibum causes the dead [brother]
to come alive again ...This is because the [widow who marries her
brother-in-law and produces a child] assumes the [paradoxical and
dual role] of 'wife-mother' [of her deceased first husband] who gets
reborn in the new union, as explained in the Zohar;⁵²⁰ as is well-
known. However, the wisdom behind this matter and the [ability] to

⁵¹⁸ R. Aharon was the rabbi of the town of Breslov.

⁵¹⁹ Deuteronomy 25:5-10 specifies that the brother of a man who died before producing children must marry his brother's widow. *Levir*, is Latin for 'husband's brother.' Online source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/levirate>. Retrieved on 08 April 2024.

⁵²⁰ See Zohar III:100b: "His [the deceased brother's] wife became his mother and his brother became his father." Translation and square brackets are mine.

achieve this [state] can [nowadays] only be fulfilled according to its [spiritual] roots, etc., etc., because the physical act of Yibum is no longer performed.

And [R. Nachman] continued to say that there is but one person [an allusion to himself] who can construct this wonderous vessel [i.e., the Shiryon] ...But this matter is such a wonderous innovation, that even speaking like this has never been heard since the creation of the universe.

[R. Nachman] continued to say that the meaning of this story of the Shiryon must be kept secret and not revealed to anyone other than select individuals. However, the matter of the Tikun of the ten psalms may be recited by, and revealed to, all” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Maaseh miShiryon*, in *Hitgalut veTikun*, Mark 2011:186).⁵²¹

Even from a cursory reading, this is not an ordinary or theologically benign document. Besides the most unusual *Zoharic* reference to אִתְּתִיָּה אִמִּיָּה (‘wife-mother’), one notices two occurrences of what Green (1992:209) had elsewhere described as the “*censor’s etc.*,” alluding to something sensitive intentionally being left out of the narrative. The word כְּנוּדָע (‘as is well-known’) paradoxically indicates an absolute *lack* of clarity (Havlin 2010:503). Also, the stark tension between a most *secret* document – the *Maaseh miShiryon* – and a most *publicised* practice of reciting *Tikun haKelali* – the *ten psalms* – is powerfully juxtaposed and contrasted at the end. The document seems to be holding something very delicate.

Although Mark (2011:186) presents this published version of the *Maaseh miShiryon* as the complete document, Liebes (2011:3) maintains that there is still text that is missing and that the material presented by Mark is not sufficient enough to be called a ‘story,’ in the way the classical *Breslov* tradition had always implied. R. Nachman’s stories are usually intricate and well-developed. Liebes writes:

“The original story must certainly have been much longer. In this case, [i.e., Mark’s published version], the Chassidim only presented

⁵²¹ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that R. Nachman’s once secret document entitled *Maaseh miShiryon*, is published in Tzvi Mark’s book, *Hitgalut veTikun* (2011:186) [Hebrew].

fragments [of the original text] as one would expect” (Liebes 2011:3).⁵²²

Liebes (2014:5) points out just how short the actual story is even in its recent and uncensored version. The previously published version only comprises *one sentence*. The recent uncensored version presented by Mark offers just *two extra sentences*. The rest of the text is an extract of a discussion between R. Nachman and R. Aharon on the meaning of the story. Yet, Mark insists that nothing is missing from the story:

“‘The Story of the Armor’ is not long, consisting as it does of a few brief lines. In fact, it is not a story at all in the customary sense. It has neither a plot nor characters...The story flows in a connected manner, without any gaps that might indicate elisions due to censorship” (Mark 2015:232).⁵²³

Liebes (2011:3), however, is quick to point out that there is even testimony from the *Breslover Chassidim* themselves that this published version of *Maaseh miShiryon* is not complete. The following editorial note is found in the new uncensored edition of *Chayei Moharan*:

עצם המעשה הוא ארוך ועליו חל איסור הדפסה. כאן נימצא כי אם ראשי פרקים
שעלהם לא חל האיסור

“The original story [of the Shiryon] is long and falls under the prohibition against publication. Here are presented only the details that did not fall under that prohibition” (Editorial note, *Chayei Moharan Im Hashmatot*, Jerusalem, 5760).⁵²⁴

Liebes (2014:7) agrees that in Mark’s recently published *Maaseh miShiryon*, there are indeed no overt references to either messianism or *Sabbatianism*. Nevertheless, this uncensored version of *Maaseh miShiryon* reveals something unknown before, and that is the connection between the *Shiryon* (*armour*) and *Yibum* (*levirate marriage*). Mark (2015:248-9) insists that the reason why the *Shiryon* story had to be kept secret

⁵²² Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵²³ The English version of Mark’s book *The Revealed and Hidden Writings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (2015) was preceded by the Hebrew edition התגלות ותיקון : בכתביו הגלויים והסודיים של (2011). See Bibliography.

⁵²⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

was because the *Yibum* reference in the *Zohar* (*Zohar III:100b*, see footnote 520) was itself “*considered to be within the category of ‘secrets’ even amidst kabbalists.*” This entire mystical genre, therefore, had to be kept secret.⁵²⁵

Liebes (2014:8, 2011:4) points out that, historically, this secrecy only prevailed among the *Kabbalists* during the early post-*Zoharic* period, and he challenges Mark’s assertion that the *Yibum* reference would have remained secret throughout the five centuries that separated between the *Zohar* – published in around 1290 – and R. Nachman. During that extended period, the original *Zoharic Yibum* reference had long lost its secrecy as it was much discussed in the general later mystical literature, so there would have been no need to perpetuate its secrecy in R. Nachman’s time.

Liebes (2014:7) presents a convincing argument that the new ‘uncensored’ document is not complete because even though two extra sentences of the text may have surfaced, there is no way that *Chassidim* of a *Rebbe* would ever go against their Master’s dictates and reveal matters he explicitly instructed them to keep secret.

According to Mark, on the other hand, one of the reasons for the *Zohar* having to keep this idea of *Yibum* secret in the first place was that it contained the radical notion of a deceased husband being reborn through his *אתתיה אמיה* (‘wife-mother’). It involved the controversial and unconventional meta-mystical idea of “*bringing a soul*

⁵²⁵ Liebes (2014:1) develops the notion that important Jewish mystics through the ages, including R. Moshe Cordovera, R. Yitzchak Luria, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Baal Shem Tov and particularly R. Nachman, all identified personally with the second century main character of the *Zohar*, R. Shimon bar Yochai, who is traditionally believed to be the author of the *Zohar* (see Terminologies for a brief discussion on the controversial matter of the authorship of the *Zohar*). According to *Breslover* tradition, R. Nachman had more than just a special affinity with R. Shimon bar Yochai, because he was his reincarnation. *Nachman ben Simcha* has the same numerical value (501) as *Shimon ben Yochai* (נחמן בן שמחה = שמעון בן יוחאי) (Prologue to *Likutey Moharan* 1995:11). This may be why R. Nachman was comfortable using the *Zoharic* interpretation (allegedly by R. Shimon bar Yochai) of *Yibum* to express his innermost secrets. Liebes (2014:1) points out that scholars like Buber emphasised R. Nachman’s *stories* as the best medium through which to understand R. Nachman’s ideas; while scholars like Scholem emphasised R. Nachman’s *teachings* as the best gateway to his thinking. To this end, Buber highlighted the *existentialism* in R. Nachman’s thought; while Scholem was more interested in his system of *mysticism*. Liebes, however, suggests a third way, which he calls *הסיפור הזוהרי* (*the Zoharic story*) – and its use by R. Nachman – to best understand his theology. Liebes (2014:1) maintains that R. Nachman’s use of the *Zoharic story* was a methodology to convey the intended message that “*as with R. Shimon [bar Yochai] in the Zohar, so with R. Nachman in Breslov.*” In this view, the secret of *Maaseh miShiryon* is an example of R. Nachman’s deployment of the pedagogic and authoritative *Zoharic story* for his own and deepest purposes. In other words, R. Nachman used the voice of R. Shimon bar Yochai to speak authoritatively for him.

back to life” (Mark 2015:249).⁵²⁶ So too, explains Mark, R. Nachman wanted to keep the intricate mystical mechanics of his *Tikun* process secret – not because of any *Sabbatian* link – but because it related to *sexual sins*; and also *brings a soul back to life* in the theurgical sense that it was a:

“rectification for a nocturnal emission, a rectification that returns the drop to its proper place and bestows renewed life both upon the seed that had been destroyed and upon the person who had incurred death” (Mark 2015:250).

Liebes (2011:4) challenges Mark’s resorting to such extreme mysticism to explain that the *Shiryon* had to remain secret because it could restore life to death and rejuvenate destroyed human potential. Liebes argues that much of R. Nachman’s teachings, in any case, involved radical and grandiose mystical ideas – and those teachings were not held back from publication. This teaching of *Tikun* should be no exception either.

From a sociological point of view, Mark argues that R. Nachman would have insisted on intense secrecy regarding the revealing of the protective mystical mechanics of the *Shiryon-Yibum*, lest people take sexual morality lightly believing that there is a ready remedy for loose morals. This way, Mark can again evade and negate any secret theological connection between the *Maaseh miShiryon* and *Sabbatianism* – because the secrecy involved a remedy that could ‘turn death into life,’ and ‘fix’ broken morals, and had nothing at all to do with secret *Sabbatian* affiliations.

I agree with Liebes that many of R. Nachman’s teachings were indeed daring, but acknowledge Mark’s point about concern for sexual morality – which may set this particular teaching apart from R. Nachman’s other mystical ideas, especially in the wake of *Sabbatian* antinomianism and *Frankian* nihilism. However, on balance and after taking all the other arguments in favour of a *Sabbatian* link into account, and not being convinced that the short published *Maaseh miShiryon* presented above is the

⁵²⁶ A biblical allusion to this mystical idea of the deceased brother being brought back to life again, can be found in Genesis 38:8: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹדָה לְאוֹנָן בֶּן אֶלְאָנָשֶׁת אָחִיד וַיְבִים אֹתָהּ וְהָקַם זָרַע לְאָחִיד. The *Sefaria* translation reads: “Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Join with your brother’s wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother.’” My literal translation, which is more in keeping with the *Zoharic* interpretation, is: “Judah said to Onan, go into the wife of your brother and do your duty (Yabem) and thereby establish the seed for your brother.” On ‘establish the seed for your brother’, see the interpretation of ‘reviving the residue of the seed,’ by R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, below.

complete and original document, I tend more towards the arguments as put forth by Liebes.

Liebes (2011:4) sharply draws our attention to the fact that, actually, R. Nachman is not at all concerned with comparing the *Shiryon* to the actual *Yibum*, because he writes in his *Maaseh miShiryon* that the “physical act of *Yibum* is no longer performed” and can nowadays “only be fulfilled according to its [spiritual] roots” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Maaseh miShiryon*, in *Hitgalut veTikun*, Mark 2011:186).⁵²⁷ This means that R. Nachman ascribes a new meaning to *Yibum* relating more to בשורשו וכו', its “[spiritual] roots, etc., etc.” Understanding R. Nachman’s conceptualisation of fulfilling a commandment in its spiritual or *root form*, as opposed to its practical and traditional observance, allows for a pivotal new way to read *Maaseh miShiryon*; and may explain the need for its secrecy.

By turning to R. Nachman’s other writings like his *magnum opus*, *Likutei Moharan*, we see the emergence of his theology on fulfilling commandments in their *root form*. R. Nachman contends that the Ten Commandments are hidden within the Ten Sayings through which the world was created. Therefore, it is possible to observe the Torah even in the ways of the world. This is why Jacob could fulfil the commandment to don *Tefilin* (*Phylacteries*) even before the Torah was given at Sinai. He did this, not by binding leather straps around his arm, but by splitting and peeling sticks (Genesis 30:37). Jacob could do this because the potential of all the commandments lay hidden within the core of the ordinary world:

נמצא שהיתה כל התורה בלה נעלמת ונסתרת בתוך ישוב העולם, שנברא בעשרה
מאמרות

“The fact is that the entire Torah is hidden and concealed within the regular world that was created through the Ten Sayings” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. II, Lesson 78:4, 1985:36a).⁵²⁸

Applying this principle, we need to ascertain how R. Nachman would have understood *Yibum*, not in the official formulation of the Torah, but in the expanded *root form*,

⁵²⁷ In R. Nachman’s time, and certainly amongst *Ashkenazim*, the *Yibum* practice had well-been abolished and replaced by a Rabbinic, and symbolic, ceremony known as *Chalitza*, which did not involve marriage.

⁵²⁸ Translation is mine.

hidden and concealed within the regular world. This may shed light on why the teaching had to remain a tightly kept secret.

The surviving brother who fulfils the obligation of *Yibum* is significantly referred to as הגאָל, the *redeemer* (see Ruth 4:1) because he ‘redeems’ his deceased brother who left no offspring. Liebes posits that R. Nachman’s vision of *Tikun* required that he return to complete and redeem the blemished and disrupted *Tikun* started by Shabbatai Tzvi:

גואל ישראל האחרון עתיד לתקן את חטא שבתי צבי, וגאולת ישראל בימיו עתידה
להיות תיקון וחזרה על הגאולה השבתאית שהשתבשה

“The final Redeemer of Israel is destined to fix the sin of Shabbatai Tzvi, and the redemption of Israel in his days was destined to be the fixing of and return to the Sabbatian redemption that had been disrupted” (Liebes 2011:5).⁵²⁹

The way I understand this is that R. Nachman daringly believed he could succeed as the redeemer where Shabbatai Tzvi had failed because he (R. Nachman) would use the *root form* of *Yibum* and be protected by the *Shiryon* – since even if messianic protagonists died, they would come back again in one form or another to complete the task. In this sense, it seems that R. Nachman may have believed that by embracing aspects of *Sabbatianism*, he was becoming הגאָל (the Redeemer): *Sabbatianism* was the ‘widowed wife’ of Shabbatai Tzvi who had not been able to produce ‘offspring’ and deliver the redemption. This ‘widowed wife’ would now serve as the אתתיה אמה (‘wife-mother’); R. Nachman would serve as הגאָל (the Redeemer) and through the *root form* of *Yibum* in its widest interpretation – בשורשו וכו’ וכו’ (according to its [spiritual] roots, etc., etc.) – birth the final and complete redemption. Understandably, an audacious teaching like this would certainly need to be kept secret. Liebes’ interpretation is a direct challenge to Mark’s claim that his published *Maaseh miShiryon* is the complete and uncensored text and that it reveals nothing theologically untoward, nor touches upon the uncomfortable matters of messianism and *Sabbatianism*.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ Translation is mine.

⁵³⁰ I thank Professor Yehuda Liebes for reading my summation of his interpretation of R. Nachman’s *Yibum* and *Shiryon* theosophy.

I suggest that Liebes' deep reading of *Yibum* in the context of R. Nachman's allusive reference to it, is well-founded. Ronit Meroz has analysed a hitherto unknown and unpublished manuscript of the *Zohar* (MS Vatican 206) that also references *Yibum*. The short text is a dialogue between R. Yosi and R. Aba who are travelling together. R. Yosi rebukes R. Aba for remaining silent on the way and not speaking words of Torah which are to afford theurgic protection on the journey. R. Aba responds with an analogy of the *Yibum* along the same *Zoharic* lines as explained above where the deceased husband is 'restored,' but he adds something new. The mystical manifestation of the deceased husband can only take place if the new levirate couple has *Kavana*, the *intention* to return that specific soul. It is not an automatic phenomenon and is only activated by the mindful intent to achieve the 'restoration' of that soul. This fundamental principle of *Kavana*, R. Aba says, was known to women in the times of Ruth, but forgotten by men in the times of the *Zohar*. R. Aba explains to R. Yosi that he is trying to reinstate the ancient, ethereal biblical theology of *Kavanah*, over the contemporary *Kabbalistic* focus on 'speaking Torah,' a metaphor for the minutiae of the commandments.⁵³¹ At the end of the narrative, R. Yosi is won over to the side of R. Aba and they walk on in silent *Kavanah*, together.

Meroz (2008:333) argues that this seemingly benign manuscript about two rabbis on a journey is, in fact, a very subversive text:

"Our story revives the debate that was current in the first half of the thirteenth century between the kabbalists and the spiritualists. The former were conservative, holding fast to the established prayer rites and the vocal expression of the words of the prayers; the latter were innovators who had been influenced by similar trends outside Judaism (especially that of Ibn Sina), and preferred a silent 'service of the heart'" (Meroz 2008:333).

R. Aba's highlighting the superiority of the path of silent experientialism, mindfulness, intent and *Kavava* – where *thinking* Torah is prioritised over *speaking* Torah – is an affront to the conservative elements within the *Zoharic* system where spirit is found

⁵³¹ It must be noted that from a reading of the text, R. Aba is not so radical as to want to abolish entirely the practical words and deeds and fulfilment of the commandments, as that would have placed him beyond the pale. Rather, what is at stake here is the role and importance of *Kavana* in the fulfilment of the commandments.

primarily in and through word and deed. The serious threat to the mainstream conservative elements is emphasised in the text by R. Yosi eventually joining the path of silence as endorsed by R. Aba, perhaps an indicator that many were beginning to follow a more spiritualist approach to *Kabbalah*.

Importantly for our purposes, this subversive path of silent *Kavana* was derived from R. Aba's interpretation of the mechanics of the *Yibum*. This manuscript may not have made it into the corpus of the printed *Zohar* because it was censored for the way it dealt with the secret of *Yibum*, the silent *Kavana* that sets the process of mystical *Yibum* in motion.

Read this way, even in *Zoharic* times there were radical spiritualist factions that symbolically downplayed the physical act of *Yibum* and focussed instead, on the underlying *Kavanah* and intent. This is very similar to what R. Nachman was saying centuries later when he spoke about the need to fulfil the *root form* of *Yibum* in its widest interpretation involving the *Shoresh* (roots) – בשורשו וכו' וכו' (*according to its [spiritual] roots, etc., etc.*). Like the original subversive spiritualist school in the *Zohar*, R. Nachman knew that his views on *Yibum*, with his special *Kavana* to draw and repair the soul of Shabbatai Tzvi, were radical. I have not seen any previous comparisons made between these two texts but it seems to be no accident that both these controversial '*Yibum* texts' – demanding a deeper means of fulfilment through *Kavanah* (intent) and *Shoresh* (roots) – were ultimately removed from circulation. Both involved a specific focus to draw down specific souls. The unpublished *Zoharic* manuscript spoke of fulfilling *Yibum* with *Kavana* (intent) to draw the specific soul of the first husband, and R. Nachman's secret text spoke of fulfilling *Yibum* in a similar *Shoresh* (root) formulation that would have been understood as to draw and 'fix' the *Sabbatian* soul.

Liebes (2011:6) is fully aware that this interpretation of R. Nachman's foray into *Sabbatianism* borders on the preposterous, especially for conservative readers, and he writes:

מעצמי אולי לא הייתי מהין לפרש באופן אלגורי כזה, כתיקון השבתאות...אך
אלגוריה זו עצמה מצאתי בכתביו של בן דורו של ר' נחמן, ר' מנחם מנדל משקלוב,
תלמידו של הגאון מווילנא

"I would, perhaps, have never been daring enough to allegorically interpret [the *Zoharic Yibum*] as a *Tikun* for *Sabbatianism*]. However,

I [unexpectedly] found [confirmation for this view in] a parallel allegorical interpretation, in the writings of a contemporary of R. Nachman, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, a student of [the head of the Mitnagdic movement,] the Vilna Gaon” (Liebes 2011:6).⁵³²

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was also responsible for the Ashkenazi settlement in Jerusalem during the early eighteenth century (Liebes 2014:8). Coincidentally or possibly under the influence of R. Nachman (!), he similarly interpreted the *Zoharic Yibum* – although within a *Mitnagdic* context.⁵³³ R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov similarly spoke of a *Tikun* of *Sabbatianism*, however, it was to be affected by the personality of the Vilna Gaon. He also spoke about the spiritual necessity of the earlier failed *Sabbatian* redemption as a stepping stone to the final redemption (Liebes 2014:8-9). He referred to two stages of redemption, one alluding to Shabbatai Tzvi, whom he called the הראשון (*the first*) – and the second stage, alluding to the surviving brother, the גואל (*redeemer*); whom he alternatively called פרוקא (*the messianic Redeemer*), משיח (*Messiah*) and מ"ה החדש (*Melech haMashiach heChadash, the new*

⁵³² Translation and square brackets are mine. It is fascinating to now read Liebes’ research dating just a few years earlier to 2003 – before Mark had published his uncensored (or partially uncensored according to Liebes) version of *Maaseh miShiryon*. Earlier, Liebes (2003:5) writes that while the *Zohar* had spoken about the radical mystical notion of *Yibum*, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was the first (!) – besides for *Sabbatians* – to offer a specific interpretation of the *Zohar* and *Yibum* linking it to a ‘fixing’ of messianism. Previous *Lurianic* writings did indeed offer a redemptive interpretation of the *Yibum* of the Book of Ruth since it culminated in the birth of House of David, but it was never before interpreted as redeeming an incomplete Messiah. This is why, when later Liebes saw Mark’s publication of *Maaseh miShiryon* – and R. Nachman’s hitherto unknown, loaded and secret reference to *Yibum* as a ‘fixing’ of *Sabbatianism* – he felt convinced that he had been on the right track.

⁵³³ While the *Mitnagdim* generally persecuted the *Chassidim*, Liebes (2011:7) suggests that because R. Nachman was an outlier amongst the *Chassidim* and even internally persecuted by them, he may have resonated with R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov. I have found a possible hint to R. Nachman in R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov’s work, *Menachem Tzion* (1885:13b): בסוד נחל גובע מקור חכמה והבן, “according to the secret of ‘A flowing stream, a fountain of wisdom’ (Proverbs 18:4) and understand this.” This verse from Proverbs contains the same Hebrew letters as נחמן, “Nachman,” and is a well-known and common reference in Breslov literature to R. Nachman of Breslov. Its use in this instance – framed before and after in implied ‘secretive’ wording בסוד (“according to the secret of”) and והבן (“and understand this”) – may support Liebes’ notion that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov drew on this particular *Chassidic Rebbe*. Perhaps their common denominator, as it were, of both R. Nachman and R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was their attempts at trying to affect a *Tikkun* for *Sabbatianism*.

King Messiah).⁵³⁴ But in this case, the *new King Messiah* seems to have been his teacher, the Vilna Gaon (Liebes 2011:6).

Liebes (2011:6) further explains that according to the *Zohar*, the intimate relations the deceased husband had with his wife – even though they bore no fruit – still left a ‘residue’ of his soul within her. Then, after his death, with the *Yibum* by his brother, the wife falls pregnant, and the child she gives birth to – the re-embodiment of the first brother – is ‘built’ upon the initial ‘residue.’ R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov mystically develops this *Zoharic Yibum* idea even deeper. The first Messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi, even though he failed in his messianic mission, was not in vain because a ‘residue’ still remained. The successful mission of the *new King Messiah* thus depended on the spiritual potential of the *first Messiah*, and had to be built upon him (see section 6.4).

5.3.2.3 Binding to the ‘Yud’ and ‘Nekuda Kelalit’

Another approach supporting possible *Sabbatian* influences on R. Nachman involves an analysis of his pointed use of certain terms that took on new and specific meanings from the *Sabbatian* period onwards. He spoke of connecting to certain universal energy points. These included his usage of terms like *Nekuda* (point), *Nekudah Kelalit* (collective point) and the instruction for his students to bind themselves to the Hebrew letter, *Yud*, which he identified as the *Tzadik*. Starting from *Talmudic* times, we shall briefly examine the theological evolution of conceptualisations of energy points – from *Emtza* (center), to *Nekuda* (point), to *Pintele Yud* and finally to *Pintele Yid* – to show how these were radically reshaped during the *Zoharic* and particularly the *Sabbatian* periods.

⁵³⁴ The abbreviated phrase מ"ה החדש (the *new King Messiah*) is used tens of times in the writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, and not once does it appear in its unabbreviated form. In a pattern often to be repeated, such abbreviations could also be safely explained away as standing for something else. In this case ‘Mah’ could be interpreted as standing for a common *Lurianic* designation for God (where the numerical value of YHVH spelt on full, יידיהוה, equals 45 or מ"ה (“Mah”). However, there are significant instances in the writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov where it can certainly mean the ‘*new King Messiah*.’ It also seems that the expression ‘*first Messiah*’ is used in reference to Shabbatai Tzvi, as the ‘*first Messiah*’ must be the inverted or mirror image of the ‘*new Messiah*’ (Liebes 2003:6).

An early reference to energy points is the mystical writings of *Sefer Yetzira* (*Book of Formation*).⁵³⁵ *Sefer Yetzira* understands an אמצע, or *Emtza* (*centre*) to be the vital *centre* of harmony and unity amidst the disunity of the universe. It finds expression in the three parallel dimensions of עולם שנה ונפש (*space, time and the human*). The *centre* of space is the היכל הקודש or Temple, the *centre* of time is *Shabbat*, and the *centre* of the human is מלת המעור ומלת הלשון, the reproductive organs and the tongue (both, respectively, representing the creative potential of the human, in terms of progeny and wisdom).

The *Talmud* expresses similar conceptualisations of these *centres*. The creation of the world is described as unfolding from within the *Emtza* (*centre*) of the world, which is the אבן השתיה, or *Foundation Stone*, situated in the Sanctuary of the Temple.⁵³⁶ Along the same lines, according to *Midrash Tanchuma* (500-800CE):

“The Land of Israel is at the centre [*beEmtza’ito*] of the world; Jerusalem is in the centre [*beEmtza’ita*] of the Land of Israel; the Temple is in the centre [*beEmtza*] of the Jerusalem; the sanctuary is in the centre [*beEmtza*] of the Temple; the ark is in the centre [*beEmtza*] of the sanctuary” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Kedoshim, 10:1*).

One notices that all these classical sources consistently refer to each energy point as the *Emtza* (*centre*). However, from the period of the *Zohar*, first published in the late thirteenth century, we encounter a very different cosmological definition of a *centre*. In the *Zohar*, there are stirrings of a move away from the classical, universal and grandiose *Emtza centres*, as depicted in earlier sources, to the human *Tzadik*. In the *Zohar*, the classical energy points combine with the human *Tzadik* who is represented, not as the *Emtza*, but as the *Nekuda* (*point*). The *Tzadik*, now presented

⁵³⁵ Although *Sefer Yetzira* is traditionally said to have been authored by either Abraham, or Rabbi Akiva, most historians date the work from *Talmudic* times (70-650 CE). According to Scholem the work contains post-*Talmudic* additions, but the main body was compiled in Palestine, between the third and sixth centuries. He writes: “*The author...attempted to ‘Judaize’ non-Jewish speculations which suited his spirit...*” (Scholem 1987:27-8).

⁵³⁶ According to the *Talmud*: “[There was a stone in the Holy of Holies] and it was called the foundation [*shetiya*] rock.... Why was it called *shetiya*? - Because the world was created [*hushtat*] from it.... The world was created from Zion... Rabbi Eliezer says: The world was created from its centre [*meEmtza’ito*= *Emtza*]” (b. Yuma 54b).

as a central universal point or *Nekuda* becomes the “*foundation of the world (Tzadik yesod olam)*” (Proverbs 10:25).⁵³⁷

In the seventeenth century, *Sabbatian Kabbalah* expanded even more on this concept of *Nekuda*:

בקבלה השבתאית קיבלה נקודה זו משמעות נוספת וזוהתה עם שבתי צבי

“In Sabbatian Kabbalah this [concept of] *Nekuda* (point) received additional significance and became associated with Shabbatai Tzvi” (Liebes 2003:20).

The *Sabbatians* then found biblical ‘proof texts’ to support the universal nature of Shabbatai Tzvi as the Messiah and the universal *Nekuda*. In his *Igeret Magen Avraham*, R. Natan of Gaza’s student, R. Avraham Perez, read Messianic references into the texts of the Psalms (Scholem 1941a:419, note 48). He also interpreted the opening word of the Torah, בראשית (*In the beginning*), to read ר' שבתאי (*R. Shabbatai*), as the letters are the same, just their order is rearranged (Liebes 2003:21).

A similar reference was found in the second verse of Genesis, “*And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.*” The phrase, אלקים מרחפת (*God hovered*), has a numerical value of 814 which is the same as that of Shabbatai Tzvi. The *Sabbatians* found further support for this interpretation, in the *Midrash* which states:

רוח אלקים זה רוחו של מלך משיח

“The spirit of God [hovered]’ – this refers to the spirit of the King Messiah” (*Bereishit Rabba*, 2:4).

On their interpretation, the *Sabbatians* believed that they had finally identified the ancient *Midrashic* “*spirit of the King Messiah*,” as the spirit of Shabbatai Tzvi. To bolster the *Sabbatian* position even more, they turned to *Sefer Yetzira* (1:9), which uses the expression רוח אלקים (*spirit of God*) to refer to the ‘*first sefira*,’ also alluding to

⁵³⁷ Liebes (2003:20) suggests that a basis for this sudden change in terminology by the Zohar, may have been the interest in geometry – during the Middle Ages – where a *centre* could be viewed as a *point*, transcending the dimensional space of the interior of a circle.

some cosmic centrality (Liebes 2003:21, footnote 145). In this sense, Shabbatai Tzvi takes on an important role in the very process of creation!

The *Sabbatians* expanded even further on the meaning of the *Nekudah*, which implies singularity. R. Natan of Gaza sent a letter to R. Refael Yosef, the head of the Egyptian Jews, explaining how the belief in the Messiah is effectively the only *Nekuda* that Judaism requires. All the other commandments fade into insignificance in the face of the universal *Nekuda* of Shabbatai Tzvi. This explains the characteristic *Sabbatian* antinomianism because the belief in the Messiah as the universal *Nekuda* now becomes הנקודה היהודית (*the Nekuda of Judaism*) and the essential purpose and ‘point of Jewishness’ (Liebes 2003:22).

The *Zohar* (1, *Bereishit*, 16b) explains that the world was created with one *Nekuda* and that was the smallest Hebrew letter, *Yud*, which looks like a dot/point. Significantly, the *Zohar* refers to this as האי נקודה יוד (*this Nekuda, Yud*). In Yiddish translations, this *Yud*, which was used for creation, becomes *Dos Pintele Yud*, or ‘this *Yud-point*.’ Historically, Yiddish translations of the *Zohar* emerged specifically during the *Sabbatian* period and by *Sabbatians* such as R. Tvi Chotch (see section 4.5). When the *Sabbatians* turned the Messiah into the primary essence of Judaism, the Yiddish translation of the *Zoharic* האי נקודה יוד (*this Nekuda, Yud = Dos Pintele, Yud*) quickly became *Dos Pintele Yid* (*this essential Jew*), alluding Shabbatai Tzvi as well. This was easy to do because, in Yiddish, both *Yud* and *Yid* were used interchangeably as references to Jews. It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude that the ubiquitous phrase *Der Pintele Yid* entered the lexicon via *Sabbatianism* (Liebes 2003:22).

In the *Chassidic* period, R. Nachman also builds on the nuances of the singular *Nekuda* and he introduces the concept of the *Tzadik* (i.e., R. Nachman, himself) being the:

נקודה כלליות של כל ישראל

“‘collective *Nekuda*’ for all Jews” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. 1, Lesson 34, 1985:48b).⁵³⁸

⁵³⁸ Translation is mine.

There is a tradition amongst *Breslover Chassidim* that whenever R. Nachman spoke about the *Tzadik*, everyone knew he was referring to himself (see section 5.3.2). R. Nachman wrote that the people must bind themselves:

להיוד היינו נקודה, שהיא בחי' צדיק

“to the Yud, which is the Nekudah, which is the aspect of the Tzadik”
(R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. 1, Lesson 34, 1985:48b).⁵³⁹

In this way, R. Nachman becomes the essential *Nekuda* comprising the *Yud* and the *Tzadik*. Everyone must bind themselves to him, through their own *Nekudot*, because he is the נקודה כלליות של כל ישראל (“*collective Nekuda*’ for all Jews”). In keeping with this interpretation, there is an important messianic aspect to this binding of *Nekudot*. R. Nachman’s student. R. Natan explains that gathering all these נקודות טובות (*good Nekudot*) – which everyone has, even evil people – is in itself a messianic act:

כי כל הנקודות טובות שמוצאין בכל אחד מישראל זה בחינת התנוצצות משיח

“for all the good Nekudot that one finds in each one of Israel are themselves sparks of the Messiah” (R. Natan Sternharz, *Likutei Halachot, Hilchot haShkamat haBoker, Halacha 1*).⁵⁴⁰

Many *Chassidic Rebbes* were indeed referred to as the גוטער יוד (*Gutter*, or *Good Yud*) which relates to this notion as well (Liebes 2003:24).

This is how Liebes describes the process of binding oneself to the human *Tzadik*:

התיקון המומלץ אפוא הוא שוב התקשרות ואמונה באיש בשר ודם, אף שאצלו אין הכוונה לשבתי צבי אלא לצדיק החסידי (כלומר לו אצמו)

“The Tikun [rectification] he [R. Nachman] advised was to return to communion with, and faith in, a person of flesh and blood, except that he did not intend that person to be Shabbatai Tzvi, but instead it was to be the Chassidic Rebbe (i.e., he, himself)” (Liebes 2003:24).

⁵³⁹ Translation is mine.

⁵⁴⁰ Translation is mine.

The *Pintele Yid*, or *Nekuda*, thus combines with the נקודה כלליות של כל ישראל (“the ‘collective *Nekuda*’ for all Jews”) – in other words, with R. Nachman – and this leads to individual as well as universal Redemption. This, outside of *Sabbatianism*, is probably one of the most dramatic constructions we find along the evolutionary path of reformulations of the classical concepts of the original *Emtza* as described in *Sefer Yetzira*, the *Talmud* and *Midrashim*.

This teaching of R. Nachman and the terminology used to describe it – particularly the constructions built upon the concept and term *Nekuda*, adduce strong indications that it had passed through the mill of *Sabbatianism* almost intact.

R. Nachman was at home at the edges and boundaries of theological doctrines. He taught that one must:

וְנִעְשֶׂה מֵאַחֵר אֶחָד כִּי הוּא קוֹצֵא דָּאוֹת ד'

“take the word Acher (**other**) [as in, ‘You shall have no **other** gods before Me’ (Ex. 20:3)] and turn it into Echad (**one**) [as in, ‘Hear Israel, the Lord...is **one**’ (Deut. 6:4)], with the point of the letter Dalet” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. I, Lesson 10:5, 1985:13a).

There is just a ‘point,’ ‘dot,’ or ‘*Kotza*’ that distinguishes between the Hebrew letter ר, *Reish*, and ד, *Dalet*; and although the material structure material may otherwise be the same, this ‘*Nekuda*’ makes the difference between heresy and orthodoxy. R. Nachman takes great pains to root his teachings in classical literature but, it can be argued, he uses these precedents in novel ways (Liebes 2003:26).

5.3.2.4 ‘*Yud*’ and ‘*Nekuda*’ in the teachings of R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt

A teaching of the *Apter Rebbe* (1748-1825) is included at this juncture because it also appears to have adapted, if not adopted, aspects of the *Sabbatian Nekuda*. My paraphrase of this teaching follows:

“The world was created with the letter *yud*. Exile is a state where the letter *yud* has been removed. But even in exile, after the *Yud* has

been withdrawn, a residue or נקודה א' (a Nekuda point), remains behind. Every descent is for the sake of ascent, and the means through which to ascend from exile is through the residual or lower Yud (יוד תתאה). This is the secret of the name יעקב (Jacob/Israel), because, without the letter Yud, Yakov would just be a lowly עקב, ekev (heel).

והכל הוא ע"י הנקודה שהוא הי"ד שנשארה אצלו [The redemption] is [achieved] through the Nekuda which is the Yud, that remains within the person.'

Everyone comes with their נקודה הפנימית (*internal 'point'*) that has remained with them, and this is their means to יזכו להגאולה (merit the [messianic] Redemption), especially in these times of עקבות משיחא, *the heels of the Messiah*" (R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Yisrael, Shemot, Zhytomyr, 1863:24a*).⁵⁴¹

This is a significant teaching because it, too, turns the *Zoharic 'creation Yud'* into a '*messianic Yud*' and involves the participation of the people activating their collective נקודה הפנימית (*internal 'point'*). This teaching of the *Apter Rebbe*, like the

⁵⁴¹ Although not conclusive, one could read this teaching slightly differently in the context of the post-Shabbatai era. In light of the various *Chassidic* attempts to 'fix' Shabbatai Tzvi, and considering how the *Sabbatians* had equated the (*Zoharic*) *Yud* of creation to Shabbatai Tzvi, this teaching opens with a very reference to the creative *Yud*. But the *Yud* has been withdrawn and we are in a state of exile. In other words, this could read that Shabbatai Tzvi has been withdrawn and we struggle in the aftermath. Nonetheless, a 'residual' or 'lower' *Yud* remains behind (perhaps in the form of *Chassidic Rebbes*). Through this residual potential that remains, one can escape the exile and attain redemption. Based on the mystical principle that the spiritual elevation after a fall is higher than the level attained before the fall, this new (*Chassidic*) redemption may be the final and ultimate redemption. All this pertains especially to this time, since we are at the עקבות משיחא, *Ikvot Meshicha* (the heels, or beginnings of the messianic age). Playing of the word, עקבות, *Ikvot (heel)*, the *Yud* can be restored to the עקב, *Ekev (heel)* and יעקב, Jacob will be whole. However, with a similar play on the word *Ikvot*, which could also mean 'on the heels of,' this could serve as an allusion to the 'building upon,' or 'repair' and 'fixing' of the previous attempt at invoking the *Meshicha*. In this process, everyone plays a part, not just the *Tzadik*, and everyone comes with their נקודה הפנימית (*internal 'point'*) to contribute to and יזכו להגאולה, merit the Redemption.

previous teaching of R. Nachman, was a very daring conceptual expression, emerging so soon after the *Sabbatians* who had made their ‘*messianic Yud*’ the singular essence of Judaism.

5.4 Synthesis

Green (1992:216, note 21) refuses to admit to *Sabbatian* or *Frankist* influences on R. Nachman and maintains that “*Nachman’s movement...remained within the pale of Jewish orthodoxy.*” Green does, however, acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining such a stance in light of the complicated and sometimes strange dialectics of R. Nachman’s history. This, coupled with the heavy-handed censorship of important sources and the allegations of secret books hidden but still extant, only adds to the complexity.

Mark (2011:206) is also ambivalent about the extent of R. Nachman’s foray into *Sabbatianism*, which he claims was “*very marginal and did not feature significantly in his world.*”⁵⁴²

Liebes is far more open to the idea of *Sabbatian* influences and adopts the view that R. Nachman believed he had found a *Tikun* for *Sabbatianism*. Liebes (2011:5) understands R. Nachman intending “*to fix and restore the Sabbatian redemption that had been disrupted.*” If this is the case, it then ties in with R. Nachman’s own words:

כי אצל הש"ק ימח שמו היו כמה גדולי הדור ולומדים מפלגים, שהטעה אותם,
במפרסם, והם יצאו מן הכלל ודברו רעות על כלל תורה שבכל-פה...אבל בשהצדיק
ממתיק דבורים שלהם, אזי הוא חוזר ועושה מהדבורים תורה

Shabbatai Tzvi, cursed be his name, had misled a number of the great leaders of Israel, as is well known. And they broke away from the community and spoke evil about the Oral Law...But when a Tzadik [righteous man] sweetens their [evil] words, those words can be restored back to Torah [words]” (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, vol. I, Lesson 207:2, 1985:112b).⁵⁴³

⁵⁴² Translation is mine.

⁵⁴³ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Liebes (2011:6-7) stresses that there are many “*detailed and specific parallels between R. Nachman and Sabbatianism*,”⁵⁴⁴ besides ‘circumstantial’ evidence like R. Nachman showing particular support for R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz who was suspected of, and charged with, *Sabbatianism* (see section 3.1.7) (Liebes 1995:65).

Michaelson (2022:196) is similarly open to the idea of *Sabbatian* influences on R. Nachman and claims that the latter “*shows the direct influence not only of Sabbateanism but also of Jacob Frank*.” Michaelson (2022:190) additionally sees *Sabbatianism* as the nucleus of not only *Chassidism* but other movements as well – raising the ante on the debate over the extent of the influence of the *Sabbatian* movement and supporting the general track of the findings of this study.

Liebes writes in no uncertain terms that:

עניין עקרוני להבנת ברסלב: היחס לשבתאות

“A fundamental principle to understanding Breslov is its connection to Sabbatianism” (Liebes 2014:5).

This, despite the fact that for R. Nachman, *Sabbatianism* continued to remain the symbol of heresy (Liebes 2003:26, footnote 173). This is an important point because *Sabbatian influences* do not necessarily turn the *influenced* into *Sabbatians*, although it does create an interesting theological sub-category. This sub-category and liminal space lie at the heart of this enquiry (see section 6.6).

We have probably arrived as close as the classical *Breslover* sources – together with the recently exposed secret *Breslover* writings – will allow us to get to an understanding of R. Nachman’s actual relationship with *Sabbatianism*. However, we are still left with questions: 1) Was R. Nachman actively involved in *Sabbatianism* as his arch-rival the *Shpole Zeida* claimed; 2) did he only ‘*strategically*’ or ‘*mystically*’ enter into *Sabbatianism* to ‘*repair*’ it; or 3) was he, at least initially, involved in some form of *Sabbatianism*, only have that detail later reframed by himself and/or his followers as a *Tikun* process? These important questions remain for further research to expand upon considering, as Liebes (2011:1) emphasises, that *Sabbatianism* continued to “*secretly simmer and stir the thoughts of Israel even in R. Nachman’s days*.”⁵⁴⁵ Whatever the answers are, *Sabbatianism* raised its head once again and

⁵⁴⁴ Translation is mine.

⁵⁴⁵ Translation is mine.

became a major issue for the *Chassidic* movement, affecting in one way or another, the *literature and personalities* of those who vacillated somewhere between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*.

We now turn to chapter 6 for an inquiry into *Sabbatian* influences on the *Mitnagdic* movement.

CHAPTER 6

SABBATIAN INFLUENCES ON THE MITNAGDIC MOVEMENT

6.1 Introduction

Sabbatian ideology is sometimes recognised as having influenced three main subsequent movements, *Chassidism*, *Haskalah* (*Jewish Enlightenment*) and modern Zionism. However, one group had always been excluded from falling under *Sabbatian* influence because of this group's apparent overt opposition to both *Chassidism* and *Sabbatianism*. That group was the conservative and traditional camp of the *Mitnagdim* (*Opponents*) who were based in Lithuania under the leadership of R. Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman Kramer, also known as the Vilna Gaon or the *Gra* (1720-1797). The *Mitnagdic* movement carries the image of unadulterated traditional Torah scholarship and stability, serving as a bastion against any extraneous influences (Liebes 2003:1).

The traditional and conservative image portrayed by the Vilna Gaon, as opposed to the mystically brash approach of the Baal Shem Tov, is typically depicted as follows:

“[The Baal Shem Tov] was not only unflinching when it came to making contact with the Sitra Achra [the evil side], but he had no qualms about confronting them [i.e., the evil forces] directly with his [spiritual] initiatives...He wrestled with demons, negotiated with Samael and tried to fix the soul of Shabbatai Tzvi...On the other hand, the Gra [Vilna Gaon] did not believe that his own mission involved any direct contact with the forces of evil” (Etkes 1998:38).⁵⁴⁶

Etkes describes the Vilna Gaon as representing a movement that did not dabble with anything outside of the sphere of traditional and conservative scholarship. However, we shall examine sources that seem to indicate that the *Mitnagdim*, particularly the students of the Vilna Gaon, also had their share of mystical – including radical *Sabbatian* – ideology that penetrated well into the nineteenth century.

⁵⁴⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine.

6.2 *Mitnagdic Aliya* during the early nineteenth century

In 1808, eleven years after the passing of the Vilna Gaon, the first group of his followers made the first of many *Aliyot* to the Holy Land, under the leadership of his student, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov. Liebes (2003:39) suggests that this *Aliya* was under the direct instruction of the Vilna Gaon.⁵⁴⁷ Arie Morgenstern (2006:79,81) also promotes the idea that these waves of *Aliya* were indeed under the instruction of the Vilna Gaon.⁵⁴⁸ These positions, however, are strongly contested by Etkes (2024:32) who emphatically denies that any such instructions were issued by the Vilna Gaon. Etkes also rejects the notion that these *Aliyot* carried any messianic overtones. Yet Liebes (2003:39), citing what he describes as convincing research by Morgenstern that these *Aliyot* were motivated by messianism, adds that his own research on the writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov correlates such a notion of messianic intent.

In any case, these new immigrants were known as the *Perushim* (*Separatists* or *Ascetics*). Within a few years, two more groups arrived, headed by the Vilna Gaon's other students, R. Riveless-Rivlin and R. Yisrael of Shklov respectively (Greenbaum 1995:130). At first, they settled in Tiberius, then in Safed and eventually in Jerusalem where they established a large community:

"It was a well-organised emigration of entire families with many young children" (Greenbaum 1995:131).

In 1813 there were 551 new arrivals (Morgenstern 2006:vi) and by 1860, the Jews made up the majority of the population of Jerusalem. This early immigration by the students and followers of the Vilna Gaon significantly influenced the later religious

⁵⁴⁷ Liebes (2003:39) writes that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov immigrated to the Holy Land, "בגראה בהוראתו; *apparently under his [the Vilna Gaon's] instruction.*"

⁵⁴⁸ Morgenstern seems to be aware of the implications of claiming that these *Aliyot* took place under the direct instructions of the Vilna Gaon as writes rather obliquely:

"Menachem Mendel of Shklov...attributes his own immigration to the Land of Israel...to being the Ga'on's disciple (Morgenstern 2006:79).

And Morgenstern continues:

"[T]hough the Ga'on himself never settled in the Land of Israel, his decision to set out for there resonated loudly among his disciples. Their descendants have a widespread though still undocumented tradition that the Ga'on in his will instructed his disciples to immigrate to the Land" (Morgenstern 2006:81).

character of settlement in the Holy Land. The Lithuanian immigrants built *Yeshivot* and financially “supported their own *shtiblakh* (prayer and study rooms)” (Greenbaum 1995:131). They established the first *Ashkenazi Kollel* in Jerusalem, known as *Kollel Vilna*, which was supported from Lithuania by R. Chaim of Volozhin, another student of the Vilna Gaon. The influx of the *Perushim* caused a housing density crisis in the old city of Jerusalem that necessitated the construction of a ‘new Jerusalem’ outside of its old walls. The landmark religious quarter of Jerusalem, known as Mea Shearim, which was completed in 1881, became the stronghold of these *Perushim*.

“Lithuanian *Perushim* and *Hasidim* continued to flow into the Holy Land...driven by the belief that they were paving the way for redemption” (Greenbaum 1995:132).

Israel Bartal (1995:52), however, argues that the *Perushim* were motivated to immigrate to the Land of Israel, not for messianic reasons but, rather, to better fulfil the commandment to study Torah on holy soil.

On the other hand, Morgenstern (2006:v) shows – through more recent research into previously unavailable manuscripts by the students of the Vilna Gaon and in communal collections of letters and records⁵⁴⁹ – how the *Perushim* were characterized by an overwhelming sense of mysticism, messianism and even *Sabbatianism*.

6.3 *Sabbatian* nature of *Perushim*

While Morgenstern (2006:vi), unlike Bartal (1995:52), acknowledges the *Sabbatian* nature of the *Perushim*, he significantly downplays the *extent* of the *Sabbatian* component.⁵⁵⁰ Morgenstern maintains that the *Perushim* were predominantly

⁵⁴⁹ After the Second World War, a sealed chest was discovered under a bridge in Amsterdam, containing fifteen large collections of communal archival material. These intercommunal records included details of fundraising, economic and ideological matters concerning hundreds of Jewish communities in Europe and new immigration to the Holy Land. Of particular interest to this study is the information gleaned from the organisation known as *Roznei Vilna* (*Nobles of Vilna*) which managed the *Aliya* of the students of the Vilna Gaon, known as the *Perushim* (Morgenstern 2006:vii).

⁵⁵⁰ Morgenstern (2006:x) does, however, acknowledge and refer to the “*revolutionary study*” by Liebes (2003) who finds evidence of a powerful and underlying *Sabbatian* motivation for the *Aliya* of the *Perushim*. I choose to focus more on Liebes as I find his arguments most compelling considering what, in my view, was an overwhelming *Sabbatian* allure that despite its many disguises and formulations, simply refused to go away. I also maintain that any

motivated by fulfilling the commandment to dwell in the Holy Land, renewing the institution of the classical *Semicha* (*rabbinic ordination*), and physically rebuilding Jerusalem. An extract from one of these newly discovered letters, dated 1837, indeed shows an undeniable sense of what Morgenstern understands as traditional messianism rather than *Sabbatian* messianism. It reads:

“And now, our spirit is exalted...to build synagogues and study halls in the holy mountain, Jerusalem...it is a good sign that it is the beginning of the redemption...The awakening on high to rebuild the ruins is dependent on the awakening below” (Letter in P. Grajewski, *miGinzei Yerushalayim*, vol. 2, 1927–1935:2).⁵⁵¹

Morgenstern – in keeping with his emphasis on traditional messianism over *Sabbatian* messianism – points to the widespread *Talmudic*⁵⁵² and *Zoharic*⁵⁵³ predictions that the Messiah was to arrive in the six hundredth year of the sixth millennium – 5600 – which corresponded to 1840. The *Perushim* believed it was a sign of the beginning of redemption when they were granted permission to rebuild the *Churva* synagogue in the old city of Jerusalem.

However, I would argue that the rebuilding of the ruins of the *Churva* synagogue by the *Perushim* in Jerusalem was no accident. A century earlier, the *Sabbatian* followers of R. Yehuda Chasid built a synagogue in Jerusalem, on the ruins of an earlier fifteenth-century synagogue. This synagogue was destroyed by the Ottomans and it became known as the *Churvah* (*ruins of*) *Yehuda Chasid* (see section 3.1.3). For

messianic movement emerging so soon after (if not during) the extended *Sabbatian* period which continued way beyond the death of Shabbatai Tzvi, cannot be viewed in isolation as just another ‘traditional’ form of Jewish messianism. Morgenstern (2006:23) refers to the “early-nineteenth-century messianic awakening” as if it were a new phenomenon and almost completely unrelated to *Sabbatian* messianism – although he does link it to the classical *Talmudic* and *Zoharic* predictions of the Messiah arriving by 5600/1840. One cannot dispute those traditional predictions, but one also cannot ignore the intervening cataclysmic event of *Sabbatianism*. See my similar arguments against comparing *Sabbatianism* to traditional Jewish mysticism in general (Michal 2022a:111-116).

⁵⁵¹ Translation and square brackets are by Joel A. Linsider in Morgenstern (2006:111). This letter was sent by the *Perushim* to R. Avraham Meir ben Yirmiyahu appointing him as an official emissary to collect money for the reconstruction of the *Churva* synagogue.

⁵⁵² The *Talmud* (b.*Sanhedrin* 99a) quotes R. Dosa as saying that the Messiah will come four hundred years before the Jewish year 6000. This corresponds to the year 5600/1840.

⁵⁵³ The *Zohar* I:17a quotes R. Yehuda as saying that after six hundred years of the sixth millennium the gates of wisdom above and the springs below will open up and God will raise Israel from the dust of exile.

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, the rebuilding of the *Churva* synagogue seemed to represent a form of mystical *Tikun* (*spiritual rectification*) and he writes:

“And [the Vilna Ga’on’s] merit and the merit of my righteous ancestors...served to bring me to the Holy Land...and there...I established study halls filled with books, for study and for prayer. But that was insufficient in His eyes, and He brought me to Jerusalem...and...I there established a study hall and a synagogue for study and prayer, and now, God has helped me to take out [of ruination] the ruin in Jerusalem, which belonged to our fellow Ashkenazim from early times and in which a synagogue was situated for more than one hundred years...” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, in Frumkin, *Toledot Chachmei Yerushalayim*, vol. 3, 1928-1930:158-9).⁵⁵⁴

One notices that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov makes a veiled reference to the early *Sabbatian Aliya* of R. Yehuda Chasid of around 1700 “*more than one hundred years*” earlier – and he refers to those *Sabbatian* immigrants as “*our fellow Ashkenazim*” – with no reference (or objection) whatsoever to their overt *Sabbatian* affiliations (see section 3.1.3). This seems to me to be a deliberate omission and implies his intent to somehow build upon the ‘noble enterprise’ begun by the known *Sabbatian* leader, R. Yehuda Chasid.

Etkes, however, takes pains to strip the *Aliya* of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov of any “*Messianic expectation*” whatsoever. Commenting on the same aforementioned extract, he writes that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov:

“does not in a single word imply that his immigration to the Holy Land involved a Messianic expectation. Moreover, he does not even claim to have immigrated to the Land of Israel on the orders of the Gaon” (Etkes 2024:30).

⁵⁵⁴ Translation by Joel A. Linsider in Morgenstern (2006:113). Regarding this citation it must be noted that Aryeh Leib Frumkin recorded this passage by R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov (which originated in the latter’s introduction to his *Shaar haTzimtzum*) which came to Frumkin in manuscript form and Frumkin published it in his *Toledot Chachmei Yerushalayim* (Etkes 2024:29).

Etkes emphasises the opening of the aforementioned extract from R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov,⁵⁵⁵ acknowledging that the merit of the Vilna Gaon brought him to the Holy Land, but this was just *one* component of many other merits including the virtue of his “*righteous and honest forefathers, and by virtue of the people of Israel*” (Etkes 2024:30). In other words, according to Etkes, there was no direct instruction to go on *Aliya* from the Vilna Gaon. The *Aliya* was simply the result of various ‘merits,’ including that of the Vilna Gaon. Morgenstern and Liebes, however, read this extract very differently from Etkes, seeing this *Aliya* as very much rooted in the instruction of the Vilna Gaon:

“People close to the Ga’on...saw in his character a supernatural phenomenon with a messianic mission related to...mysteries of the Torah, and the charting of a practical course for the redemption of the Land and people of Israel” (Morgenstern 2006:78).

Morgenstern reminds us that the Vilna Gaon also set out for the Holy Land but his journey was aborted for some unknown reason. Another of his disciples, R. Yehoshua Heschel Levin, who also acted as the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Volozhin, writes:

“[The] Ga’on...was a spark of Moses...and Heaven therefore denied him permission to enter the Land” (R. Yehoshua Heschel Levin, *Aliyot Eliyahu*, 1856:39b).

On this, Morgenstern comments in sharp contradistinction to Etkes (2024:30) who claims there was no “*Messianic expectation*” relating to these *Aliyot*:

“[T]he Gaon’s mission was to be the agent of providence, charged with...initiating the final stage in the redemption of the Jewish people on its land, but he himself did not lead them there” (Morgenstern 2006:80-1).

Furthermore, Morgenstern (2006:87) argues that the Vilna Gaon’s students were “*fully aware that they were acting in a revolutionary manner*” by actively transgressing the *Talmudic* ban of the *Three Oaths*, which included not pressing for the (messianic) End nor immigrating to the Land:⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁵ R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, in Frumkin, *Toledot Chachmei Yerushalayim*, vol. 3, 1928-1930:158-9.

⁵⁵⁶ According to the *Talmud* (*Ketuvot* 111a):

“[The students of the Vilna Gaon] explicitly departed from the traditional stance, confronted it, and rejected it” (Morgenstern 2006:87).⁵⁵⁷

Morgenstern (2006:88) goes on to emphasise that this messianic awakening by the *Perushim* was revolutionary in the extreme and could only have endured its departure from traditionalism with the support and authorization of their leader, the Vilna Gaon. At the centre stage of the messianic program was the settlement or redemption of the land:

“Redemption of the Land was the highest concern of the Vilna Gaon’s disciples...Settlement of the Land of Israel was not a means...but an

ג' שבועות הללו למה אחת שלא יעלו ישראל בחומה ואחת שהשביע הקדוש ברוך הוא את ישראל שלא ימרדו באומות העולם ואחת שהשביע הקדוש ברוך הוא את אומות העולם שלא ישתעבדו בהן בישראל יותר מדאי

“Why are there the Three Oaths? [This is based on three similar verses about ‘אַסִּי־תַעֲרֶרְךָ אֶת־הָאֱהָבָה, *not awakening the love*,’ recurring in Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4]. One [oath], so that Israel does not ascend (ya’alu = aliya) as a wall [en masse, or as Rashi comments: ‘יחד ביד חזקה’, *together with force*]. The other [oath], so that Israel does not rebel against its [host exilic] nations. And the other [oath], that God made the [host exilic] nations swear that they would not subjugate Israel overbearingly”

Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁵⁷ Historically, before the first half of the eighteenth century, there was little Jewish habitation in Czarist Russia. This was mainly due to religious exclusionism by the Russian authorities. However, this began to change from the late 1700s after the partitions of Poland, and soon Russia was home to about a million Jews. This made it the largest centre of Jews in Europe. (Morgenstern 2006:14). With this large immigration of Jews to Russia, came the intolerable Cantonists’ Decree of the Russian army draft between 1721 and 1857, which included children from as young as eight or twelve. Its program of intense Russification and assimilation of Jews was interpreted as the breaking of the third Oath by the nations of the world, ‘*not to subjugate Israel overbearingly*.’ For many, including the students of the Vilna Gaon, the Cantonists’ Decree now signalled the end of the period of adherence to the Three Oaths (Israel of Shklov, *Igrot Eretz Yisrael*, 1943:352). Although the Vilna Gaon (at least at the time of his writing the following statement) did not consider the restrictions against *Aliya* and pressing for the End to be binding, the only restriction, in his view, was that of physically building the Temple:

שמושבין שלא יצאו מאליהם לבנות בה"מ שושנה דלעילא עד שיבא

“They are bound by the oath not to independently build the Temple, the Heavenly rose, until he [the Messiah] comes” (*Siddur haGra*, Section 2, *Pirush haGra al Shir haShirim [Vilna Gaon’s Commentary on Song of Songs]*, *Likutim al Derech haNisatr*, 1898:48a).

Translation and square brackets are mine.

end in itself...building the Land was the principal goal” (Morgenstern 2006:90).

Etkes, as mentioned above, completely denies any messianic motivation whatsoever and sees no link between:

“the immigration to the Land of Israel by students of the Gaon [and] to any initiative or instruction of their rabbi. Likewise, his words give no support to the claim that this immigration involved a Messianic expectation” (Etkes 2024:32).

For Etkes (2024:32) – and as noted earlier, Bartal (1995:52) – the main reason for their journeying to the Land was “*the centrality of Torah study*” which is better achieved in that holy place. Etkes cites a letter from R. Chaim Katz:

“And our people who come to the Holy Land for the most part come to attain purity and to be occupants of the beit midrash, toiling over Torah and worship....the Holy Land has a greater capacity for Torah study than foreign lands do, as daytime and nighttime are equal and available for Torah acquisition, and the truth gets clearer” (R. Chaim Katz in Yaari, ed. *Igrot Eretz Israel*, 1943:339–40).⁵⁵⁸

Even those who argue that ideas about a new messianic revival were widely held by many of the disciples of the Vilna Gaon would agree that there were some exceptions. One such exception was R. Menashe of Ilya (1767-1831), also a student of the Vilna Gaon but one who adopted a more rationalist approach. He opposed the attention that *Kabbalah*, in general, was receiving from the *Mitnagdim* and, significantly for our study, he identifies the messianic awakening of that time (contra Etkes) as specifically being of a *Sabbatian* nature. He writes:

“Anyone who abounds in stupidity and firmly clings to a false [Heb. sh-q-r, having a numerical value of 600]⁵⁵⁹ belief is holy in his own eyes. But anyone who wishes to use his mind to inquire whether there is substance to his words is said to be of the mixed multitude [cf. Exod. 12:38] whose nature and origins preclude belief... But...it is well

⁵⁵⁸ Translation by Saadya Sternberg in Etkes (2024:34).

⁵⁵⁹ The numerical value of 600 would refer to the Hebrew year 5600/1840, the year of the *Talmudic* and *Zoharic* messianic predictions, as discussed earlier.

known what happened in this regard in the time of the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi...and we still have not escaped him and his legacy” (R. Menashe ben R. Yosef of Ilya, *Alfei Menashe*, part 2, 1822: 51–52).⁵⁶⁰

R. Menashe of Ilya notes that anyone opposing messianic fervour is immediately labelled an outsider, like the biblical Mixed Multitude who were not considered part of the core of the nation. The same term, ‘Mixed Multitude,’ had been bestowed upon the opponents of *Sabbatianism* during the time of Shabbatai Tzvi, indicating that they were not considered part of the Jewish nation because they did not believe in the Messiah. According to R. Menashe of Ilya, it was no coincidence that this current persecution – this time by his Vilna colleagues – was occurring once again during the nineteenth century. It was a continuation of the *Sabbatian* persecution of its opponents, the Mixed Multitude, who this time, refused to believe in their Lithuanian or *Mitnagdic* messianism.

That the *Frankists*, for example, were still active in important centres like Prague – well into the nineteenth century – can be seen in a work by R. Elazar Plekelsh. He criticises the overt messianism of the *Frankists* who believed the year 1800 was the year of the Messiah:

“Now I know that just as they went mad over this year [5560 (1800)], there will be other periods and times, with their hidden and perverse allusions, of which people will say the year has come, and they will cite indications and raise up signs, [said to be] from secrets of the sage and wise. Thus [they also do] regarding the year 5600 [1840]...they find an allusion in the Zohar...” (R. Elazar Plekelsh, *Ahavat David*, 1800:Introduction).⁵⁶¹

Thus, the *Mitnagdic* messianism had been compared to *Sabbatainism* and *Frankism* in two contemporary rabbinic sources. Morgenstern (2006:41) acknowledges these *Sabbatian* and *Frankist* influences on the *Perushim*, but regards them as secondary to what he considers the greater effect of a more universal *Zoharic* messianism that had built up around the eschatological expectations for 5600/1840. Yet, he

⁵⁶⁰ Translation by Joel A. Linsider in Morgenstern (2006:37).

⁵⁶¹ Translation by Joel A. Linsider in Morgenstern (2006:41).

simultaneously concedes that much information concerning the *Sabbatian* leanings of the students of the Vilna Gaon and of that period, in general, has been heavily suppressed:

“[T]he Sabbatean false-messiah debacle...only strengthened the taboo on dealing with it. We therefore lack written documentation of the messianic awakening that preceded the year 1840, and we may assume that once this bubble of messianic expectation, like its predecessor, had burst, efforts were made to suppress all recollection of the embarrassing episode and the little that might have been daringly written down before 1840 was later destroyed” (Morgenstern 2006:vi).

If Liebes and Morgenstern (to a lesser degree) are correct about the underlying *Sabbatian* influences on the *Perushim* – and considering the open *Sabbatianism* of the *Aliyot* a century earlier around 1700 – then the extent of the *Sabbatian* role in the history of modern Zionism deserves more research (see section 7.7).

According to Liebes particularly, there can be no question that the students of the Vilna Gaon were drawn towards *Sabbatianism*:

ידוע היה שתלמידי הגר"א בארץ ישראל החזיקו בכמה מנהגים שבתאיים

“It was known that the students of the Vilna Gaon [who settled] in the Land of Israel adopted a number of Sabbatian customs” (Liebes 2003:1).⁵⁶²

For example, they nullified the recitation of the *Kinot* (*dirges*) in the *Tikun Chatzot* (*Midnight Petition*);⁵⁶³ omitted a verse from *Lecha Dodi*;⁵⁶⁴ and relied on the controversial *Sefer Chemdat Yamim* which was suspected of being a *Sabbatian* work (see section 4.6) (Liebes 2003:1; Morgenstern 2006:131). While these may seem like insignificant omissions and practices, in the charged atmosphere of intensely religious,

⁵⁶² Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁶³ The *Midnight Tikun* or *Tikun Chatzot*, is a midnight lamentation remembering the destruction of the Temple. Some of these lamentations could now be omitted because the *Perushim* believed that the redemption had already begun and there was no longer a need to mourn the destruction.

⁵⁶⁴ The hymn welcoming in the Sabbath. The omitted verse was ‘*Hitnaari*,’ calling on Zion to arise from the dust. The verse was omitted because the *Perushim* believed that the redemption had begun and Zion was no longer in the dust.

especially messianic environments, small acts and even single words, can take on tremendous significance. In light of Liebes' research, what seems now like obvious indications of *Sabbatian* affiliation, were missed by previous researchers who would never have entertained such suspicions when it came to the ostensibly straight-laced *Mitnagdim* and *Perushim* who came from the cradle of the Vilna Gaon in Lithuania.

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov writes with almost open references to *Sabbatian* ideology and is fully aware of the *Sabbatian* content of his teachings. Whether or not his writing was rooted directly in the teachings he heard from the Vilna Gaon is difficult to assess at this stage, although we do know that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was particularly close to the Vilna Gaon, especially in the latter's last years. He was also responsible for collecting and publishing his teacher's writings (Liebes 2003:2-3).

6.4 Writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and his student R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver (Wildmann)

Liebes acknowledges that, until recently, suggesting any affinity between the *Mitnagdim* and *Sabbatians* would have been preposterous. However, recent findings:

מחוגו של הגר"א...מגלים זיקה מפורשת אל השבתאות

“from the group of the [students of the] Vilna Gaon, reveal an explicit connectivity with Sabbatianism” (Liebes 2003:2).⁵⁶⁵

These recent findings include the publication of the two-volume set of כתבי הגרמ"מ ז"ל (Kitvei haGramam zal – *Writings of the Gaon, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, zal*)⁵⁶⁶ in 2001. The frontispiece refers to the “*holy writings*” of the “*Godly Kabbalist*” who was a “*talmid muvhak (main student)*” of the Vilna Gaon, and that the material in these volumes was gathered from his hitherto unpublished manuscripts. There still remain other unpublished writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov (Liebes 2003:3). In a manner that is surprisingly similar to the ‘revelation’ of R. Nachman of Breslov’s

⁵⁶⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁶⁶ The title of the book *Kitvei haGramam zal* translates as *Writings of the Gaon, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, zal* (‘zal’ is an abbreviation for ‘*zichrono liveracha*’ – ‘may his memory be for a blessing’). In this case, the student is also referred to by the honorific *Gaon* (*Genius*), like his teacher, the Vilna Gaon. *Gaon* was traditionally the title used for the heads of the *Talmudic Academies* in Babylonia between the sixth and eleventh centuries.

hitherto secret writings around 2005 (see section 5.3.2.2), the editors of the 2001 published collection of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov's autographic manuscripts, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, were “wondrously revealed” and facilitated by R. Shmuel Aryeh Stern – with the claim that this too is a sign of the imminent redemption. Also, in a strikingly similar manner to R. Nachman of Breslov, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov warns his readers to uphold the secrecy of his teachings:

כמה דברים הוצרכתי להסתיר ולדבר בדרך רמז, כי אסור לגלות אפילו מפה לאוזן
כו'

“I have had to hide many things and speak [only] in hints, for it is forbidden to reveal [these teachings] even from mouth to ear [let alone to publish them]” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov in Frumkin, *Toledot Chachmei Yerushalayim*, vol 3, 1929:160, footnote 2).⁵⁶⁷

This need for secrecy brought an element of paradox into these types of teachings because, as Liebes (2003:4) points out, at the same time that these teachings had to be kept secret, there was still a need to awaken the Jewish world to the imminent messianic reality. This required these secrets to be disseminated and made known:

אוי לי שצריך אני להיות הוליד רביל ומגלה סוד... אבל ראיתי עני עמנו ב"י... עת
לעשות כו'

“Woe is me that I have to be deceitful and reveal secrets...but I see the [spiritual] poverty of our people, the House of Israel...[and] it is now time to act etc.”⁵⁶⁸ (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:90).⁵⁶⁹

In another source but in a similar vein, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov writes:

אגלה סתרי פלאות... מחמת אשר ישוטטו רבים והלכו אחר שטותם... עד שמדיחין
את האמת מפני השקר. לכן עת לעשות לה'

⁵⁶⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine. Regarding this citation it must be noted that Aryeh Leib Frumkin recorded this passage by R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov (which originated in the latter's introduction to his *Shaar haTzimtzum*) which came to Frumkin in manuscript form and Frumkin published it in his *Toledot Chachmei Yerushalayim* (Etkes 2024:29).

⁵⁶⁸ A reference to Psalms 119:126, “It is now time to act for God.” This expression is often interpreted in rabbinic literature as a call to act boldly in extenuating circumstances, and to challenge the existing norms, for the greater good.

⁵⁶⁹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

“I will reveal awesome secrets...since many have stumbled and followed their foolishness...to the extent that they have pushed aside the truth in favour of the false. Therefore, it is now time to act for God...”⁵⁷⁰ (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Menachem Tzion*, 1987:13a).⁵⁷¹

Liebes does not doubt that to “*reveal awesome secrets*” meant to reveal *Sabbatian* secrets. Liebes (n.d.:42, footnote 377) is convinced that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was influenced by the work *Tzadik Yesod Olam*, attributed to R. Yitzchak Luria but actually written by the *Sabbatian* messianic claimant, R. Leibele Prossnitz (see section 3.1.6). R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov’s gravitation towards *Sabbatianism* also seems to have been related to earlier strands of mystical messianic *Tikunim* (*spiritual rectifications*). He was not averse to studying *Sabbatian* works because he believed there was a way to turn the impure into pure, thus redeeming *Sabbatianism* (Liebes 2016:621). Based on new revelations in the recent publication of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov’s manuscripts, Liebes (2003:5) suggests that these included the *Tikunim* developed by Shabbatai Tzvi and R. Natan of Gaza. These encompassed their conceptualisation of affecting a *Tikun* for Jesus (Scholem 1973:217, 272, especially 284-287, 296, 306). It seems that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was similarly determined to finally affect the ultimate *Tikunim*. R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov could do this because, in his understanding of messianism, there was an “*associative connection*” and parallelism between Christianity and *Sabbatianism* that existed already from the early days of R. Natan of Gaza (Liebes n.d.:18-19).⁵⁷² Liebes (n.d.:18, footnote 133) suggests that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov saw a necessary progression of Messiahs from Jesus to Shabbatai Tzvi to the Vilna Gaon and then – after the Vilna Gaon’s passing – to R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov himself! (Liebes 2003:39).⁵⁷³

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, based himself on the teachings of the Vilna Gaon⁵⁷⁴ who compared this world to the world of ‘*Tohu*’ (*emptiness*) (as in Genesis

⁵⁷⁰ Again, the same reference to Psalms 119:126 as in previous excerpt.

⁵⁷¹ Translation is mine.

⁵⁷² This “*associative connection*” preceded the blatant and *overt connection* to Christianity under Jacob Frank (Liebes n.d.:19).

⁵⁷³ See footnote 598.

⁵⁷⁴ See *Sifra deTzniuta im Biur haGra* (1913:9).

1:2), where freedom of choice allows for the world to either be ‘fixed’ or ‘destroyed’ by humans. This era of total freedom of choice would last until the end of six thousand years in the Jewish calendar. At that point, freedom would be withdrawn and a new messianic epoch would begin when the choice of God – not humans – would prevail. In the meanwhile, however, humans are in an extremely powerful position and are afforded complete independence to *hasten* or *delay* the arrival of the Messiah through their actions and choices. This theology of absolute freedom of choice has tremendous bearing on R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov’s notion of ‘fixing’ previous failed Messiahs because “*even Messiahs can fail and delay the Redemption*” (Liebes n.d.:43) due to bad choices. But these failures can be redeemed. Additionally, in the case of Shabbatai Tzvi, there was an almost universal and unprecedented yearning for the Messiah that had been generated amongst the masses of Jews and that energy should not be allowed to dissipate in vain. The grassroots *Sabbatian* messianic awakening can be conceived as building blocks and potential for the future and final Messiah (Liebes n.d.:48).

A note before proceeding: the sources that follow need to be mined quite deeply for ‘coded associations’ because not many in the traditional rabbinic world of the nineteenth century would have made *direct* and *open* references to *Sabbatianism* or Shabbatai Tzvi even if they were intending to ‘elevate’ or build on a ‘failed but necessary’ messianic theology.

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov often writes in Aramaic, seemingly to mimic the *Zoharic* style of *Kabbalah*:

עד שיבוא הגואל ופריק יתיה והאי פרוקא בני ליה במלקדמין

“...until the Redeemer comes to redeem us, and this Messiah will be built up from the previous [Messiah/s]” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:163-4).⁵⁷⁵

In a similar sense, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov writes in a heavily coded phrase replete with *gershaim* (*inverted commas*), which, in this style of writing, generally indicate a hidden *Sabbatian* reference:

⁵⁷⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine. It is not always easy to decipher exactly which Messiahs are being referred to in these writings, but it certainly seems to fit the general post-*Sabbatian* style of mystical writings where Shabbatai Tzvi is considered the recent Messiah that needs to be ‘fixed’ by the final Messiah (Liebes 2003:7).

וצניע"ו זר"ע קוד"ש גי' בראשית...ראשית התעוררות האהבה והקליטה

“[The phrase] ‘The holy seed is hidden’ has the same numerical value [913] as ‘Bereishit’ (‘In the beginning,’ Genesis 1:1). [The Hebrew letters of ‘Bereishit’ are the same as ‘R. Shabbatai,’ ר' = בראשית = שבתאי]...[who] initiated the [messianic movement and the] awakening of love and the ingathering [of the people]”⁵⁷⁶ (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.1, 2001:166).⁵⁷⁷

Here it seems that Shabbatai Tzvi is being acknowledged and praised for creating a massive messianic “תעוררות, *awakening*” due to his being a “זר"ע קוד"ש, *holy seed*” or *holy potential*. This *holy potential* – which must be built upon yet remedied – should remain “צניע"ו, *hidden or secret*” knowledge. The value of this spiritual and messianic awakening and hunger that had been established within the population by Shabbatai Tzvi must not be underestimated.

Shabbatai Tzvi's spiritual awakening was seen to be the fulfilment of the prophecy of Amos (8:11) who spoke of a “רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ, *hunger in the land*”) which was not for bread but rather to hear “*the words of God*.” R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov is particularly aware of the value and potential of this spiritual awakening and he alludes to it in his comment on Ruth (1:1) “וַיְהִי רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ, *and there was a hunger in the land*.”

He writes:

וזהו 'ויהי רעב בארץ'...וס"ת צבי...ובהן כלל האמונה הנשארת בארץ...נשאר
הרשימו...בסוד 'רעב בארץ'

“And this is the meaning of ‘And there was a hunger in the land’ [Ruth 1:1]...[where] the last letters [of this Hebrew verse make up the name] Tzvi⁵⁷⁸...and this [hunger] represents the Emuna [faith] [Emuna also has the same numerical value as Tzvi = 102] that [still] remains in the land...because [indeed] a residue [of this awakening still]

⁵⁷⁶ קליטה can mean ‘ingathering’ or ‘absorption’ but it can also mean ‘comprehension.’ In this context it could mean both the messianic ‘ingathering’ of the people and/or the ‘comprehension’ and awareness of spirituality.

⁵⁷⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁷⁸ The last letters of ויהי רעב בארץ make up the name צבי.

remains...[And all this falls under the] secret [interpretation of] 'hunger in the land.' (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Menachem Tzion*, 1987:2-3).⁵⁷⁹

In a very difficult, highly coded and perhaps slightly corrupted extract, we find two references to 'Shabbatai' (שבתאי) and possibly also to Jacob Frank (מאדי"ם):

סוד שבתאי מאדי"ם. כי מבין סוד הנקוד"ה אמצעית, שהן סוד שכנו"ת, ויקרא ...
ש"ם מן זה סוד חש"ך גי' שבתאי מאדי"ם, ור"ת ש"ם

(R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:171).

The strange expression שבתאי מאדי"ם (*Shabbatai Maadim?*) is used elsewhere in R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov's writings.⁵⁸⁰ The formulation מאדי"ם (*Maadim or meiEdom = from Edom?*) seems to be related to *Edom* which often refers to Christianity. This may allude to Jacob Frank who converted to Christianity. The 'new Messiah' will 'fix' the 'first Messiahs' of *Sabbatianism* and *Frankism* – Shabbatai Tzvi and Jacob Frank, respectively (Liebes 2003:11).⁵⁸¹

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov's main student and the most important *Kabbalist* in the school of the Vilna Gaon, was R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver (Wildmann). Following the typical coded writing styles of secret *Sabbatians* – including their insertion of *gershaim* (*inverted commas*) – he references tell-tale expressions like אל תמירנו, which is the numerical value of Shabbatai Tzvi (400+400+10+4=814); צדיק באמונתו, which is an allusion to המרת דתו or the apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi; and, יחיה, where the first letters correspond to צבי, Tzvi (Liebes 2003:18; Wildmann, Yitzchak Isaac Chaver, *Afikei Yam*, Machon Shaarei Ziv, Jerusalem, 1994, vol. 1, 37-38).

An example of possible ambivalence towards antinomianism – at least on a theoretical level – may be found in the writings of R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver. This teaching was produced at a time when one would have expected the echoes of

⁵⁷⁹ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁸⁰ R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.1, 2001:229.

⁵⁸¹ The notion of a messianic duo is not unusual. See Michal (2022a:47).

Sabbatianism, especially their *Halachic* antinomianism to have subsided – and certainly within the conservative *Mitnagdic* movement:

כל המצות יש בהם בחי' עלי' וירידות...לפוגמין' [צ"ל לפעמים] עושים רש"ם [רצונו
של מקום] בו'

"All the commandments have an aspect of advance and decline...sometimes one does the will of God, etc." (Wildmann, *Be'er Yitzchak*, commentary on R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Mayim Adirim*, 1987:4-5).⁵⁸²

If one follows through on the 'coded "etc."' and concludes the sentence, the implication is '*sometimes one keeps the commandments...and sometimes one does not.*' Liebes (2003:31, footnote 236) notes that the printed text of *Be'er Yitzchak* also contains an ellipsis (the 'three dots' in the aforementioned excerpt), after "*advance and decline.*" Perhaps the ellipsis serves to indicate that the original manuscript was illegible, or perhaps it suggests that the text was censored. I would imagine that at a time when the students of the Vilna Gaon were using *Sabbatian* terminology and ideology to *counter*, or as they saw it, to *redirect Sabbatianism* while mystically and counterintuitively standing on the shoulders of the '*first Messiah*,' Shabbatai Tzvi – that was radical enough, but they still printed it. However, anything that would have remotely resembled *Halachic* antinomianism – like describing cycles of *Halachic* "*advance and decline*" – would have been overreaching and may have been the reason for what appears to have been a censoring of the text.

Both R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and his student R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver made frequent references to the controversial *Nekuda* – or '*Pintele*' – and even interpreted it more pointedly than the *Chassidim* (see sections 5.3.2.3 and 5.3.2.4). In the following extract, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov discusses two Messiahs. Shabbatai Tzvi is the first Messiah⁵⁸³ and he is associated with the first-century *Talmudic* rabbi turned heretic, Elisha ben Avuya, also known as *Acher*.⁵⁸⁴ The first Messiah, *Acher*, must be 'fixed' by the second Messiah corresponding to R. Akiva:

⁵⁸² Translation is mine.

⁵⁸³ 'First' and 'second' Messiahs are used in the sense of being relative to each other and not necessarily first and second on the chronological stage of history, as we shall see.

⁵⁸⁴ As mentioned earlier, R. Nachman expounded upon the miniscule difference between the written forms of *Echad* (אחד) and *Acher* (אחר) being the *Nekuda* or "*point of the letter Dalet*"

ר' עקיבא בסוד...ויצאה נשמתו באחד, שהוא תיקן מה שקלקל אחר...וזה שורש הנקודה של ד' של אחד...וזה הנקודה שורש של זה השער, צדיקים יבואו בו...כי התורה ממתקת הכל...תורה ג' סמא"ל ליל"ת...עו"ן ופש"ע וחטא"ה

"R. Akiva [corresponds] to the secret of...his soul departing [while he recited] Echad, [and he] restores what Acher had damaged...This is the root of the Nekuda [point] of the Dalet of Echad...and this Nekuda [corresponds to] the root of 'This is the gate [to the Lord]...Tzadikim pass through it' (Ps. 118:20)...[This method is effective] because the Torah sweetens everything...[The word] 'Torah' has the same numerical value [611] as 'Samael Lilit'...[and also the same numerical value as] '[forgiving] iniquity, transgression, and sin' (Exodus 34:7)" (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:116).⁵⁸⁵

The *Nekuda* plays a very significant role in this teaching because it still relates to the first Messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi. This is reminiscent of *Sabbatian Kabbala* where:

היוד היא הנקודה ונשמת המשיח

"the Yud is the Nekuda and soul of the Messiah" (Liebes 2003:28).⁵⁸⁶

This is because "*the root of the Nekuda*" is the "*gate*" through which "*Tzadikim pass through*" (צדיקים יבואו בו). The first three letters of the Hebrew phrase make up the word צבי, or "*Tzvi*." This teaching emphasises the notion that the spiritual and messianic archetype of a *R. Akiva* can 'fix' and 'sweeten' the iniquity of an *Acher*, in any of their

(ד)," and the importance of turning the "*Acher into Echad*" (see section 5.3.2.3). R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, a contemporary of R. Nachman, expands on this idea and *Acher* and *Echad* are no longer mere concepts, but become personified as *Acher* (Elisha ben Avuya) who also represents the 'first Messiah' (= Shabbatai Tzvi) – who must be redeemed by R. Akiva, the 'second Messiah.' R. Akiva (a historical contemporary of *Acher*) represents *Echad* as he died with the word *Echad*, from the declaration of the *Shema Yisrael* (Deuteronomy 6:4), on his lips. Thus, the homiletical tensions between *Acher* and *Echad* as depicted by R. Nachman, are played out more dramatically by R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, with his latter-day personifications of the Messiahs of Elisha ben Avuya and R. Akiva respectively. R. Akiva was also regarded as the most mystical of the four rabbis who entered the *Pardes* (b. *Chagiga* 14b) which may also be an allusion to R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov who was considered even more mystical than the Vilna Gaon (Liebes n.p.:41). The 'second Messiah' always redeems the 'first Messiah.'

⁵⁸⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁸⁶ Translation is mine.

later formulations, manifestations or incarnations. The difference between *Akiva/Echad* and *Acher* is just the tiny point or *Nekudah* of the *Yud* (י), which turns the rounded *Reish* (ר) of *Acher* (אחר) into the square-shaped *Dalet* (ד) of *Echad* (אחד). The implication seems to be that the initial *Reish* is still needed to act as the ‘base’ or ‘gate’ to form the *Dalet*.

Also, in the text are two references to a *Nachash* (snake). The Hebrew word for *snake*, נחש, has the same numerical value (358) as *Messiah*, משיח. Shabbatai Tzvi had strongly identified himself with the image of a snake (see section 2.2.3). In keeping with the mystical concept of spiritual equilibrium, the נחש הקדמוני (*primordial snake*) has to be countered by the other snake, the נחש הטהור (*holy snake*). But it goes even deeper, because although the later Messiah ‘sweetens’ and ‘fixes’ the earlier blemished Messiah, the earlier Messiah – Shabbatai Tzvi in this case – remains a necessary *Nekuda* and ‘gateway’ in the unfolding of the messianic program (Liebes 2003:27, 36).

R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver refers to the Messiah who redeems Shabbatai Tzvi as נחשא דחיי (*the snake of life*). This may have been based on an interpretative reading of the biblical copper snake (Numbers 21:9) which restored life (וַחַי) to those bitten by the snakes in the wilderness. R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver explains that the function of the נחשא דחיי (*the snake of life*) is to rectify the earlier Messiah:

והוא נחשא דחיי, וע"י יתבערו אותם דאיתין מסטרא דנחש הקדמוני

“This [later Messiah] is the ‘snake of life,’ and through him are removed [or destroyed] those who come from the ‘earlier/primordial snake’” (Wildmann, *Afikei Yam*, vol. 1, 1994:37-8).⁵⁸⁷

The question, of course, is who does R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver identify as the final Messiah who redeems Shabbatai Tzvi? In the same text by R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver, just a few words earlier, are two references to אליהו (Eliyahu or Elijah). While one reference certainly refers to אליהו, Elijah the Prophet, the other reference adds the

⁵⁸⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine.

coded *gershaim* (*inverted commas*) often used by *Sabbatians*, to make אליהו. Liebes comments about the context of this teaching:

קשה לקרוא דברים כאלה על אליהו בספרו של ר"א, בלא לקורשם לרבו הנערץ, ר'
אליהו חגאון מוולנה

"It is difficult to read these words about Eliyahu in the book by R. Yitzchak Isaac [Chaver], without connecting them to his admired rabbi, R. Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna" (Liebes 2003:37).⁵⁸⁸

The idea of previously failed messianic attempts rectified by the final successful accomplishment of the ultimate messianic act is described in earlier *Talmudic*⁵⁸⁹ and particularly *Kabbalistic* literature. These sources describe one or sometimes two types of snakes that impregnate the doe, איילה (representing the *Shechina*, and sometimes even the *Kelipa* or *evil forces*) and birthing the Messiah (Liebes 1992:21, 39, 45).

There are different formulations of this idea of a snake biting the doe which is derived from interpretations of Psalm 29:9, "קול יהוה יחולל אילות", *The voice of the Lord causes hinds to calve*" (see section 4.7.5). However, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and his student R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver extend the interpretations of the two snakes beyond anything expressed before. The sexual innuendo is quite graphic as two encounters are described. One encounter is successful and the other not – analogous to the staff of Moses which also alternates as a snake (Liebes n.d.:25). Shabbatai Tzvi was the ineffective Messiah who could only be redeemed by the greater *Tzadik*, the Vilna Gaon, who is described as "נחשא דחיי", the *living or effective snake*" (Wildmann, *Afikei Yam*, vol. 1, 1994:37-8). The Vilna Gaon himself makes a similar reference to "חויא דחיי", the *living snake*⁵⁹⁰ (Vilna Gaon, *Biur haHeichalot leGaon, Yahar Or*, 1913:29). The Vilna Gaon writes:

שתרין חויין הן חד דחיי וחד דמותא

⁵⁸⁸ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁵⁸⁹ b. *Bava Batra* 16b. Here the *Talmud* simply mentions how the snake, or דרקון (*drakon*) in this instance, bites the opening of the womb of the doe to aid in the birthing process. The later mystical literature expands on this imagery. For the snake injecting "*his impurity into Eve*" see *Zohar* I:54a.

⁵⁹⁰ The two Aramaic expressions, נחשא and חויא both refer to a 'snake.'

“There are two types of snakes, one is alive, the other is dead” (Vilna Gaon, *Biur haHeichalot leGaon, Yaher Or*, 1913:35).⁵⁹¹

This style of erotic *Kabbalistic* writing (Maciejko 2014:xxv) carries some semblances of *Sabbatianism* (Halperin 2008:3; Liebes 2016:618-9) and is similar to the work *vaAvo haYom el haAyin*, attributed to R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, which Maciejko (2014:xix) has described as a “*pornographic text...written in the rabbinic idiom.*” In any case, no matter what idioms or imagery were used to show how the final Messiah is more effective than the earlier ones, it seems that the venerating students of their esteemed teacher, the Vilna Gaon, had little doubt as to who that redeemer was going to be.

In the Vilna Gaon’s commentary on the Torah, the word הוא״ל appears, also with similarly coded *gershaim* (*inverted commas*). This word הוא״ל is taken from הוא״ל מִשֶּׁה בָּאֵר אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת, “Moses *undertook* to expound this Torah” (Deuteronomy 1:5). In the interpretation of the Vilna Gaon on the word הוא״ל (“*undertook*”), he says that at the end of days, Eliyahu will come back to earth as the ‘*Moses of the last generation,*’ and expound on the Torah in its deepest sense. The word הוא״ל (“*undertook*”) has the same Hebrew letters as אליהו (*Eliyahu*).⁵⁹² The Vilna Gaon writes, rather tellingly, that הוא״ל, this concept equating הוא״ל (“*undertook*”) to אליהו (*Eliyahu*), “*is a hidden secret*” (Vilna Gaon, *Aderet Eliyahu*, 1887:331).

Identifying the Vilna Gaon as the Messiah would have resonated with R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov who refers to the new Messiah as a גר (*stranger*).⁵⁹³ In his view, the new Messiah is considered a ‘stranger’ or ‘outsider’ because he is allowed to delve into matters that no other Jews should engage with:

והגואל...נכנס בתוך התהום...והוא דוגמת נפש הגר ממש, שחוקר מה שאסור לחקור
לישראל

“The Redeemer...enters into the abyss...and absolutely resembles the stranger, who investigates that which is forbidden to investigate”

⁵⁹¹ Translation is mine.

⁵⁹² ‘*Eliyahu*’ can either refer to *Elijah the Prophet* or to R. Eliyahu, the *Vilna Gaon*.

⁵⁹³ In addition to ‘*stranger*,’ גר can also mean a ‘*convert*.’

(R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:167).⁵⁹⁴

The students of the Vilna Gaon promoted the idea that he was not just a great Torah scholar, but also an exceptional secular scholar. Although some of his students, like R. Chaim of Volozhin, tried to deny the Vilna Gaon's engagement with secular wisdom and even misrepresented the evidence thereof,⁵⁹⁵ we know that that was not the case:

“[i]t is widely recognized that the Gra [i.e., the Vilna Gaon] had a personal interest in general knowledge, especially the exact sciences; the evidence is abundant” (Shuchat 2023:6).

R. Yisrael of Shklov corroborates this view with some detail:

“This is what he [the Gra] said: All knowledge is necessary for [understanding] our holy Torah... He knew them all thoroughly and mentioned them: algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and music which he praised greatly...He knew human anatomy and all things relevant to this...And regarding the wisdom of philosophy he said that he had studied it thoroughly” (R. Yisrael of Shklov, *Pe'at haShulchan*, 1836:5).⁵⁹⁶

The Vilna Gaon's grandson, R. Yaakov Moshe of Slonim together with his uncle, R. Yehuda Leib, the Gaon's son, testified:

“[The Vilna Gaon] explained the constellations...and their paths...three hundred and three new principles never seen before in the land of Judea. He researched and prepared a wondrous chart of fractions” (*Biurei Zohar*, 1810:Introduction).⁵⁹⁷

The depiction of the Vilna Gaon in such an extraordinary way for a Torah scholar is seen by Liebes as part of the messianic scheme. The Vilna Gaon was allowed to look into matters that no one else was allowed to because that is the function of the Messiah. In this sense, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov saw the Vilna Gaon, or *Gra*

⁵⁹⁴ Translation is mine.

⁵⁹⁵ “*R. Hayyim consistently omitted all biographical facts relating to the Gaon's knowledge of secular studies*” (Shuchat 2023:5).

⁵⁹⁶ Translation by Shuchat (2023:7).

⁵⁹⁷ Translation by Shuchat (2023:9).

(גר"א) as a stranger, or *Ger* (גר) because only he could enter the secular realms and raise the sparks hidden therein (Liebes 2003:38). In a similar way, the new Messiah would sweeten the teachings of the old Messiah:

המשיח החדש ממתק בחקירתו את...תורתו של משיח הראשון...ומסמל שם את
הלבוש הנוכרי שלבש שבתי צבי אחרי המרתו

"The new Messiah, through his [secular = non-Jewish] research sweetens...the teachings of the first Messiah...and symbolises [and counters] the non-Jewish garment Shabbatai Tzvi adorned himself with when he apostatised" (Liebes 2003:11).

Raphael Shuchat also notices that R. Chaim of Volozhin – even though he tried to deny his teacher's involvement in secular wisdom – nevertheless describes "*the Gra in almost messianic tones*" (Shuchat 2023:13).

However, Liebes suggests that from the perspective of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, the Messiah was not to be the Vilna Gaon, who had already passed away when he wrote this teaching. Instead, the ultimate Messiah was to be R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov himself!⁵⁹⁸ He believed he was well qualified for this position because he expounded on the mysteries of the esoteric Torah even more than his late teacher. Perhaps he too (like some of the other students) felt that his teacher may have overstepped the boundaries with his involvement in secular wisdom and therefore failed in his messianic endeavour.

For the purposes of this study, there seems adequate evidence that leading *Mitnagdim* were prepared to work with and refine what they understood as potentially positive elements of *Sabbatianism* and even of Shabbatai Tzvi himself. This, coupled with their adoption of some *Sabbatian* customs, and open references to *Sabbatian* ideology (Liebes 2003:1-3), supports the notion of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Mitnagdic* movement.

⁵⁹⁸ Liebes (2003:39) remains open to the possibility that (at least while the Vilna Gaon was still alive), R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov may have considered his teacher to have been the Messiah. Liebes suggests that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov's activities were most likely intended to be "*the completion of the messianic activities of his teacher*, השלמה לפעילותו, המשיחית של רבו."

6.5 Writings of, and about, the Vilna Gaon

It has always been difficult to ascertain exactly where the Vilna Gaon himself was positioned apropos the interest his students had demonstrated regarding the role Shabbatai Tzvi played in the unfolding of the messianic phases (see previous section 6.4.). Unexpectedly, one area to examine for clues of the Vilna Gaon's position, is the debate over his view on the correct *Halachic* method of writing the letter *Tzadi* (צ) for ritual use in *Sifrei Torah*, *Mezuzot* and *Tefilin*. This seemingly innocuous matter stirred up tremendous controversy amongst his students and should be viewed against a *Sabbatian* background (Liebes n.d.:2).

The letter *Tzadi* (צ) looks like a bent-over *Nun* (נ) with a *Yud* (י) in the top right-hand corner. Just like other Hebrew letters, the top left-hand corner of the (*bent*) *Nun*, already resembles a *Yud* – and, to constitute the *Tzadi*, it additionally has another *Yud* placed on the right. This *Yud* on the right of the *Tzadi* usually faces left just like its counterpart on the left (on top of the *Nun*) and just like every other *Yud* in its normal orientation. However, the mystics would sometimes reorientate the right-hand *Yud*, and either make it face right (as in its mirror image) or they inverted it. We will not deal with the inverted *Yud* but shall instead focus on the mirror-imaged *Yud*, facing right and called the *Yud Hafucha* (the *opposite* or *mirror-imaged Yud*).

Some students of the Vilna Gaon claimed that their teacher had prohibited the use of the *Yud Hafucha*. Others – including R. Aryeh Leib Friedman who dedicated a book to this matter of *Yud Hafucha* – counterclaimed that their colleagues were relying on השערות פורחות באויר, “*assumptions floating in the air*,” and that the Vilna Gaon did not oppose the use of the *Yud Hafucha* at all (Friedman, *Tzidkat haTzadik*, 1954:95). On one occasion in his writings, R. Aryeh Leib Friedman became so angry about the ‘perceptions’ that the Vilna Gaon had prohibited the *Yud Hafucha*, that he severely reprimands those who perpetuated this ‘rumour’ (Friedman, *Tzidkat haTzadik*, 1954:46). Rabbinic literature is replete with opposing views and variant *Halachic* rulings but it seems that something of greater significance was bothering R. Aryeh Leib Friedman in the case of the *Yad Hafucha* (Liebes n.d.:4).

Representing the camp of the students of the Vilna Gaon who claimed that their teacher had prohibited the use of the *Yud Hafucha*, is R. Yisrael of Shklov (considered an expert in expounding the *Halacha* of his teacher). He writes:

והיה מזהיר...[ש]הצד"י כפופין עקומין מאחריו ה" פוסל...והיה אומר דגמירא ליה
דבא טעות בכתב"י על ידי תלמידי הצבי שבור, שהעתיקו בתוך כ' האר"י ז"ל
"[The Vilna Gaon] would warn...[against the use of] the 'bent Tzadi'
[=צ, as opposed to the 'straight Tzadi' or 'Tzadi Peshuta' =ק] with the
thorn [i.e., the tip of the Yud] facing backwards [to the right], as [such
a formulation of Yud Hafucha] would invalidate it...and [the Vilna
Gaon] would say that this [mistaken practice] was adopted from a
forgery to a text of the Ari Zal [R. Yitzchak Luria], by the students of
'Tzi shavur'⁵⁹⁹ [=Shabbatai Tzvi]" (R. Yisrael of Shklov, *Tosefot
Maaseh Rav, Siman 6, in Tzidkat haTzadik*, 1954:46).⁶⁰⁰

From this source, it becomes apparent that the ostensibly *Halachic* debate over the *Yud Hafucha* is essentially rooted in a *Sabbatian* controversy. The question is what were the circumstances surrounding the alleged *Sabbatian* insertion of the *Yud Hafucha* into the *Lurianic* writings? This, particularly since it is generally understood that R. Yitzchak Luria indeed insisted that *Tefilin* be written *with* the *Yud Hafucha*.⁶⁰¹

What we have here is not just a *Halachic* debate but a veritable theological polemic, which, as we shall see, concerns the identity of past and present Messiahs. We know from many sources that long before *Sabbatianism*, the custom in both *Ashkenazi* and *Sefaradi* communities was to write the *Tzadi* with a *Yud Hafucha*. The *Zohar* (1:2b) spoke of the *Yud Hafucha* on the *Tzadi* which "מהדר לאחורא", "faced backwards." So why would some have claimed that the Vilna Gaon had prohibited the *Yud Hafucha*?

Sabbatian stirrings around the *Yud Hafucha* began more than a century before R. Yisrael of Shklov, with his grandfather (Liebes n.d.:16), R. Yisrael ben Aharon Jaffe also of Shklov.⁶⁰² In the latter's book entitled *Or Yisrael* (Jaffe, *Or Yisrael*, 1702:41) –

⁵⁹⁹ This is a borrowed expression from *Mishna Bava Metzia* (1:4) referring to acquiring ownership of a crippled deer that broke its leg while in the owner's field. The ancient legal *Mishna* refers to a "crippled deer," or "tzvi shavur" ('tzvi' means a deer), which later in a completely unrelated context, became a convenient and derogatory play on words and a reference to the 'crippled' Messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi.

⁶⁰⁰ Translation and square brackets are mine. R. Aryeh Leib Friedman questions this attribution to R. Yisrael of Shklov (Friedman, *Tzidkat haTzadik*, 1954:45).

⁶⁰¹ See Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Shulchan Aruch haRav, Orach Chaim*, ch 36 (2008:143).

⁶⁰² Liebes is convinced that the earlier *Sabbatian* activity in Lithuania with rabbis like Heshil Tzoref, coupled with rabbinical families maintaining intergenerational links to their *Sabbatian*

a known *Sabbatian* work (see section 3.1.11) – there is a teaching about the *Yud Hafucha*. It bases itself on the *Zohar* (1:2b) which states that the world could not be created with the letter *Tzadi* because the two *Yuds* did not match each other. However, in the future, the *Tzadi* would be re-established without the *Yud Hafucha* and with the right-hand *Yud* facing the left side as per its usual configuration.

R. Yisrael Jaffe claimed that that time had already arrived and that the messianic era had begun. R. Yisrael Jaffe maintained that there are numerical values that (anachronistically) connect the *Zoharic* teaching to Shabbatai Tzvi because the *Zohar* refers to a future time as, “אתרא אחרא, *another place*” when the *Yud* is restored to its usual configuration. R. Yisrael Jaffe noted that “אחרא אתרא, *another place*,” has the same numerical value of 814, corresponding to God’s name *Sha-dai*⁶⁰³ as well as to Shabbatai Tzvi. Other *Sabbatians*, including Wolf, the son of R. Yehonatan Eibeschutz (see sections 3.1.7 and 3.1.8) also made similar references to this section of the *Zohar* (Liebes n.d.:12). This underscores the notion that the *Yud Hafucha*, although originating in the *Zohar*, was later interpreted within a *Sabbatian* context and even extended into the camp of the Vilna Gaon.

Whichever way one interprets the Vilna Gaon’s alleged invalidation (or otherwise) of the *Yud Hafucha*, there was a strong residual component of *Sabbatian* messianic innuendo – prevalent in Vilna – relating to the way the letter *Tzadi* was to be written (Liebes n.d.:17). As we shall see, in the mystical context of Vilna, the *Yud Hafucha* would have represented the historical incarnations of the incomplete *Tzadi* – the previous Messiahs – who are all conceptualised as the embodiment of ‘Bela’:⁶⁰⁴

זה הבלע הוא הפוך האמונה...הפוך משרע"ה

“Bela represents the [spiritual] inverse [Hafuch] of Emunah [faith]...[and] the [spiritual] inverse [Hafuch] of Moses [the complete

past – like R. Yisrael of Shklov and his grandfather R. Yisrael Jaffe of Shklov – would have contributed to maintaining a strong *Sabbatian* ideological presence in Lithuania.

⁶⁰³ According to the *Aleinu* prayer which concludes all prayer services, in the messianic future all humanity will be united under the name *Sha-dai*. The numerical value of 814 is derived from *Sha-dai* spelt in its ‘full form’ as שין דלת יוד. This *gematria* or numerical value of 814 is perhaps the most common of the *Sabbatian* codes for references to Shabbatai Tzvi (Liebes n.d.:12).

⁶⁰⁴ See below (footnote 613) where Bela, Bilaam, Edom, Seir, *Daat*, *Eirev Rav* (Mixed Multitudes) are equated with Jesus and Shabbatai Tzvi, representing the *Tzadi* and *Yud Hafucha* (inverse *Yud*).

Tzadik]...” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:4).⁶⁰⁵

Bela is depicted as the archetype of the incomplete *Tzadi* while Moses represents the completed *Tzadik*. The various future incarnations of the incomplete *Tzadi* are to play out and run their courses over history until the final Redemption by the *Tzadik*.

Unlike R. Yisrael of Shklov who claimed that the Vilna Gaon had invalidated the *Yud Hafucha*,⁶⁰⁶ R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov adamantly clung to his position that permitted either orientation of the *Yud* of the *Tzadi*, whichever way it faced:

או פניה לגבי הנ"ן, או הי' (וד) מחזיר פניו מהנ"ן...זה לא איכפת לך...ואלו ואלו
דברי אלוקים חיים

“Whether [the right-hand *Yud*] faces the Nun [as per its standard orientation], or whether the *Yud* turns its face away from the Nun [in a mirror-image]...it makes no difference [and neither orientation will invalidate a scroll]...as [both] ‘these’ and ‘those’ [orientations of the *Yud*] are [compatible with] the words of the living God” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:272).⁶⁰⁷

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov sees the possibility of incorporating the *Yud Hafucha*, with all its blemishes, into the necessary cosmic messianic schema. R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov continues to emphasise that the orientation of the *Yud* “*makes no difference*,” and it is evident that he is alluding to some form of correspondence between the earlier imperfect *Tzadi* and the later perfected *Tzadik*. The later *Tzadik* is the perfected incarnation of the earlier *Tzadi*. R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov uses coded *gershaim* (*inverted commas*) to allude to possible correlations between the *Yud Hafucha* and *Sabbatianism* and Christianity (see section 6.4):

כי מה שהי' (וד) מחזיר א... (ת) פניו מין הנ"ן, ועומד באחוריו...והיינו כי צדי אנת
וצדיק אנת ואנת צריך למהוי בטמירו', והיינו שסוד צדי, נקרא צדי ונקרא צדיק, כי

⁶⁰⁵ Translation is mine.

⁶⁰⁶ This may have had something to do with the *Sabbatian* affiliation of his grandfather, R. Yisrael Jaffe, who wanted to see the *Yud* of the *Tzadi* in its normal orientation thereby endorsing Shabbatai Tzvi as the Messiah. I'm not sure that R. Yisrael of Shklov went that far, but he may have seen some messianic potential in Shabbatai Tzvi that needed redeeming. That may have been why he was happy to promote the notion of the *Yud* in its usual orientation, and claim that the Vilna Gaon prohibited the *Yud Hafucha*.

⁶⁰⁷ Translation and square brackets are mine.

עשו הוא הצד צי"ד [=צדי]...והוא איש שעיר...והוא ג"כ בדע"ת גי' ער"ב ר"ב, ואין בין זה לזה...כחד חוטא...ומי מפיס ומי יכריע

"This [matter] of the Yud [Hafucha, of the Tzadi] which turns its head away from the Nun [in its mirror-image orientation] and faces backwards...represents the [Zoharic concept of] 'You are Tzadi and you are Tzadik and you must remain a secret' [Zohar 1:2b]⁶⁰⁸...This represents the secret of the Tzadi, which is called [both] Tzadi and Tzadik [i.e., the proto-Tzadik or Tzadi, precedes and parallels the final, fixed and completed Tzadik]. Esau [representing Christianity], 'hunted game' [Genesis 27:33]. [The Hebrew for 'game,' ציד, has the same letters as צדי, Tzadi]...He [Esau] came from Seir.⁶⁰⁹ ...He [Esau] also [corresponds] to Daat [knowledge] [Daat is symbolic of Bilam, who is depicted in the *Talmud*⁶¹⁰ as representing Christianity, and in later literature as representing Sabbatianism as well.⁶¹¹ In this reading, Esau and Bilam are thus conceptually connected. Bilam in Kabbalistic literature is described as the Daat, or knowledge, obtained by the Sitra Achra (Evil Side) because "וידע דעת עליון", he obtains the knowledge of the Most High" (Numbers 24:16). Bilam is the negative counterpart to Moses who possess the Holy knowledge]. Daat has the same numerical value as Eirev Rav [Mixed Multitude = Sabbatians = 474]⁶¹² And there is no difference between [any] of these two

⁶⁰⁸ The *Zohar* 1:2b describes the *Tzadi* having two *Yuds*, "מהדר לאחורא, facing backwards" to each other. Its meaning had to remain a secret until a point in the (messianic) future when the right-hand *Yud* would be turned around to its regular orientation. The *Sabbatians* later claimed that that time had now arrived.

⁶⁰⁹ According to Genesis (26:9) "עשו אבי אֶדוֹם בֶּהָר שְׁעִיר", *Esau the ancestor of Edom, in the hills of Seir*". Both Seir and Edom are therefore associated with Christianity.

⁶¹⁰ b. *Gitin* 57a. Although the *Talmudic* text, in its plain reading, seems to distinguish between Jesus and Bilaam, over time the two personalities became conceptually united (Liebes n.d.:19, footnote137).

⁶¹¹ Particularly in the writings of R. Yakov Emden (Liebes n.d.:19).

⁶¹² The term Mixed Multitude was generally used to refer to the *Sabbatians* (although sometimes it was also used the other way around to refer to the opponents of the *Sabbatians*). In this case the reference to *Sabbatians* seems to be the intent.

[opposing architypes]...except for a single [thin] thread⁶¹³...But who will affect the reconciliation between these [opposing architypes] and who will determine [the outcome]?” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:273).⁶¹⁴

What is revealing about this section of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov’s writing is the unusual way he creates an equivalence of past Messiahs, Christian and *Sabbatian* (representing the incomplete *Tzadi*). These past Messiahs all build on each other and find expression in the final Messiah (representing the complete *Tzadik*) – seemingly himself, but certainly the Vilna Gaon while he was still alive – who is the only one capable of reconciling, integrating and funnelling all the previous messianic potentials.

Picking up on the abovementioned conceptualisation of Esau and Bilaam corresponding to Christianity, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov continues to deliberate on how the new Messiah can rectify the previous Messiahs:

וכל טוב גנוז בשביל הצדיק, אך הוא ביד בלע מלך אדום, מחמת שבעו"ה חיל בלע...ובאמת אח"כ נתקנים בסוד מ"ה החדש...ויודע ענין התורה וסודה על בוריו והלכה כמותו בכל מקום

“All good is hidden [away] for the Tzadik, but he is in the hands of Bela [Bilaam is Bela]⁶¹⁵ the king of Edom [Christianity/Sabbatianism], [but] because of our sins, Bela dominates...and in truth afterwards [Bela] will be rectified through the secret of the new Messiah...[who] knows the matter of the Torah and its secrets in its entirety and the law is [decided] according to him in all cases” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:4).

⁶¹³ Thus: Esau is equated to Bilaam who represents the *Daat* of the *Evil Side*. Bilaam/Bela/Esau represent the counterpart to Moses. Esau also represents *Daat = Eirev Rav (Mixed Multitude)* = 474, which equates *Christianity* with *Sabbatianism*. Moses is the complete ‘Tzadik,’ while the Messiahs of Christianity and *Sabbatianism* represent the incomplete ‘Tzadi.’ There is no difference between ‘Tzadik’ and ‘Tzadi’ except for a “single thread,” and therefore they can be reconciled (Liebes n.d.:19).

⁶¹⁴ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁶¹⁵ According to *Eitz Chaim* 8:4 (1961:113) “בלעם הוא בלע, *Bilaam is Bela*.” *Eitz Chaim* records the *Lurianic* teaching of the Ari, as compiled by his student, R. Chaim Vital. However, while Bilaam is Bela, Bilaam represents the Bela that has not been refined. Once Bela is refined and ‘sweetened’ he becomes Moses. R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov viewed Shabbatai Tzvi as the Bilaam who could be transformed into the Bela (and becomes like Moses) – or, put the other way, Shabbatai Tzvi was the potential Moses/Mashiach who deteriorated into Bilaam but he could still be redeemed (Liebes n.d.:85-6).

At the time of his writing, it seems that R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was referring to his teacher as the new messianic candidate. The Vilna Gaon certainly knew “*the matter of the Torah*” because he was regarded as a *Gaon* (*genius*). He also knew *Kabbalah* and “*its secrets in its entirety*,” and he commanded unparalleled *Halachic* authority.

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov’s writings move into deeper christological associations and become a conceptualisation of what appears to be a most unusual – especially for rabbinic writings – chain or dynasty of Messiahs that include: 1) Jesus (בן, *Ben*, ‘son’ in Hebrew or בר, *Bar*, ‘son’ in Aramaic); 2) Shabbatai Tzvi (בור, *Bor*, ‘pit’); and 3) the Vilna Gaon (בא, *Be’er*, ‘water well’). Linguistically these names are similarly constructed and they also prefigure and reflect each other conceptually. In an astonishing piece of coded writing, we find:

סוד בן. ובן אלוקים אדני גי באר...והוא בר של בראשית...בסוד בר בור
באר תריג, שהוא תכלית בריאת העולם, וזה בן נתברר...ובאר משה אליהו
“The secret of [the word Ben] ‘son’:⁶¹⁶ The [expression] ‘son of God and Lord’ has the same numerical value (203) as ‘well’ [Be’er, representing Eliyahu, the Vilna Gaon]. This [‘son,’ Ben in Hebrew, or] Bar [‘son’ in Aramaic] represents the **Bar** of **Bereishit** [the first two letters of ‘In the Beginning’ (Genesis1:1)]⁶¹⁷...[This forms part of] the secret of Bar [Jesus], Bor [Shabbatai Tzvi,⁶¹⁸ and] Be’er [Vilna Gaon]⁶¹⁹ who together have the numerical value of Taryag [תריג = the

⁶¹⁶ The Hebrew formulation בן (just like מ”ה) can be read as common *Kabbalistic* names of God (*Ban* and *Mah*). However, in the context of redeeming previous Messiahs, it seems to carry its literal connotation of *ben* or ‘son’ together with its Christological insinuations; as well as *Mah* acting as an abbreviation for *Mashiach heChadash*, the ‘new Messiah’ who redeems the old Messiahs (Liebes n.p.:59, footnote 592).

⁶¹⁷ This is remarkably similar to the New Testament’s John 1:1-3 which has Jesus participating in the creation of the world.

⁶¹⁸ The expression ‘*Bor*’ (בור) is an acronym for “ויהי רעב בארץ, and there was a hunger in the land” (Ruth 1:1). As mentioned earlier, this *spiritual hunger* was considered a positive consequence of Shabbatai Tzvi. This way *Bor* corresponds to *Shabbatai Tzvi* as R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov confirms: בור רעב בארץ (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Menachem Tzion*, 1987:3).

⁶¹⁹ The text continues “ובאר משה אליהו, *Be’er* [represents the completion of rabbinic law through] Moses and Eliyahu [Vilna Gaon].” *Be’er* = Moshe = Eliyahu (Vilna Gaon) who

613 commandments of the Torah],⁶²⁰ which is the purpose of the creation of the world, because the ‘son’ [Ben] has been purified...and Be’er [represents the completion of rabbinic law, Taryag, through] Moses and Eliyahu [Vilna Gaon]” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:303).⁶²¹

Each Messiah builds on the potential of their predecessor just like the *Be’er* (water well) of the Vilna Gaon fills the empty *Bor* (pit), dug by Shabbatai Tzvi, who, in turn, ‘fixed’ aspects of the *Bar/Ben* (son). The word *Ben* has the same numerical value as *Eliyahu* (= 52) and when read within the context of the coded inverted commas, the message is that *Eliyahu* (the Vilna Gaon), who corresponds to Moses, can ‘fix’ the *Ben* who is also connected to Shabbatai Tzvi. This ‘dynasty’ of Messiahs allows the ultimate messianic *Tikun* affected by the Vilna Gaon to remedy the previous Messiahs.

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov continues to allude to Christianity in his typical coded writing style with copious *gershaim* (inverted commas) on significant words that require extra interpretation:

מחמת עונותינו נסתתר אלהינו בשביל זה בבע"ל הדין הזה...שורש ב"ן סטד"ה

“Because of our sins, God is hidden due to this accused/litigant [Baal hadin] [i.e., Shabbatai Tzvi]⁶²²...rooted in ben Satada [a Talmudic reference to Jesus⁶²³]” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.1, 2001:66).

We have seen that there is an equivalence between Esau, Bilaam, Bela, *Daat* of the *Evil Side* and *Eirev Rav*. They represent the spiritual counterparts of Moses. In *Lurianic Kabbalah*, Bela represents the holy ‘sparks’ that became absorbed (נבלעים = absorbed

combine to ‘fix’ the *Bor* (Shabbatai Tzvi) and the *Ben/Bar* (Jesus). Eliyahu corresponds to and represents the Moses of the generation (Liebes n.d.:62).

⁶²⁰ According to this reading, the accumulated messianic potentials of Jesus, Shabbatai Tzvi and the Vilna Gaon together represent the ‘wholeness’ and ‘completion’ of the 613 Commandments.

⁶²¹ Translation is mine. The last phrase בא"ר משה אליהו corresponds to the earlier referenced verse והואיל משה בא"ר, “Moses undertook to [expound this Torah]” (Deuteronomy 1:5). The word הואיל (undertook) has the same letters as אליהו (*Eliyahu*), the Vilna Gaon.

⁶²² The word בעל *Baal* has the same numerical value as צבי *Tzvi* = 102.

⁶²³ b. *Shabbat* 104b. The section of ‘ben Satada’ has been removed from many editions of the *Talmud* because of the censors. It is, however, found in the Steinsaltz edition. Liebes (n.d.:36, footnote 318) explains ‘ben Satada’ to be a generally accepted reference to Jesus.

= בלע = Bela) within *Tuma* (spiritual impurity) (Liebes n.d.:27, footnote 215). Bela becomes the archetype representing an obsession with overt mysticism and spirituality at the expense, and in place, of *Halachic* observances. This is why Bela represents Christianity and *Sabbatianism*. The extreme spiritual seekers of Christianity and *Sabbatianism* ‘fell’ because of a spiritual הבלענות (*gluttony*) and coveting of secrets of the Torah that were far too deep and not meant for them:

כי הקב"ה נותן לו חכמה ומגלה לו בסוד, סוד ה' ליראי

“for the Holy One...gives wisdom and reveals secrets, [as it states in Psalms 25:14] ‘The secrets of the Lord are for them that fear Him’”⁶²⁴
(R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:4).⁶²⁵

The earlier incarnations of the *Tzadi*, therefore, made the mistake of coveting and overemphasising mysticism, spirituality and secrets while not being entirely worthy of such endeavours. As a result, they subjugated the primacy of the *Halacha*. This required remedial action necessitating R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and the Vilna Gaon to enter those very realms that Jesus and Shabbatai Tzvi had entered into but superseding them in matters of *Kabbalah* (Liebes n.d.:36, 37). They had to supersede them in the knowledge of mysticism in order to remedy them and bring them back to the Law. In fact, their involvement in *Kabbalah* had to exceed even that of Moses:

והבא לחקר חפץ להיות יותר ממשה רבינו

“And the one who comes to delve [into this remedial Kabbalah] needs to [be more proficient] even than Moses our Teacher” (R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov, *Kitvei haGramam zal*, vol.2, 2001:4).⁶²⁶

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was not all that unusual in trying to rectify previous Messiahs because, as we have seen, even the Baal Shem Tov saw an aspect of the

⁶²⁴ Besides a desire for extreme mysticism, the *Sabbatians* emphasised *Emunah* (belief) over *Halacha*. The one who ‘fixes’ *Sabbatianism* must have a more serious approach that is congruent with *Yirah* (awe) – not just *belief*. This would necessitate a concomitant acceptance of *Halacha* that was lacking with the *Sabbatians*. The serious and conservative *Halachic* approach of the Vilna Gaon was, therefore, also seen as befitting the new Redeemer worthy of the “secrets” which are specifically “for them that fear Him,” and not for the other Messiahs (Liebes n.d.:39).

⁶²⁵ Translation and square brackets are mine.

⁶²⁶ Translation and square brackets are mine.

Messiah in Shabbatai Tzvi and had tried to 'fix' him with a *Tikun* (spiritual rectification). The same may be said about R. Nachman of Breslov (see section 5.3). The difference was that the Baal Shem Tov gave up on his spiritual ambitions to rectify Shabbatai Tzvi, whereas R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov believed he, himself, had accomplished this goal and had completed the *Tikun* (Liebes n.d.:35).

Additionally, where R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov radically differed from the approach of the Baal Shem Tov and R. Nachman of Breslov, was in his relationship to Christians and Christianity. Around this period, there was much Christian missionary activity in the Holy Land, under the patronage of the London Society. They were well-organised and kept accurate and meticulous records. The members of this organisation held fast to their belief that the redemption of the Jews would herald the redemption of mankind, and the return of Jews to their homeland would be one of the early signs confirming the unfolding of that plan. They were very keen, therefore, to document the waves of Jewish immigration to the Holy Land (Morgenstern 2006:viii).

In an unusual messianic irony, the *Perushim* the missionaries shared some common interest – so much so that R. Shlomo Hershel Berliner, Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of London, wrote unapprovingly of the situation:

“And see, the...Perushim in the Holy Land play up to them [the missionaries]. Alas for the embarrassment...would that our co-religionists...were still living in the Diaspora” (R. Shlomo Hershel Berliner, *miKitvei R. Shlomo Hershel Berliner miLondon*, n.d.:528).

R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was known to have often engaged with these missionaries and even managed to return some Jews, who they had converted to Christianity, back to Judaism. He did this by showing the apostates the role they could play as Jews in the process of Redemption. These Anglican missionaries were able to exert political pressure on the Turks to allow the *Perushim* to rebuild the ruins of the *Churva* synagogue (Liebes 2003:40). R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov's association with Christians, therefore, must be viewed within the context of his determination to 'fix' all previous Messiahs, including Jesus.

On the other hand, R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was not the first to use the image of the *Nun* and *Yud Hafucha* compounded together to form the letter *Tzadi* as a symbol of Christianity in general, and of Jesus, in particular. Liebes (n.d:20) shows that in both the *Zohar* and *Sefer haBahir*, the *Tzadi* with the *Yud Hafucha* was

sometimes understood to allude to Jesus (possibly even to the acronym *Yeshu haNotzri* or *Jesus, the Christian*). In the *Midrashic* work *Otiyot deRabbi Akiva* (especially the earlier manuscripts of the work) – which Liebes suggests may be the originator of the *Zoharic* interpretation – the letter *Tzadi* is directly associated with Jesus. R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov was, therefore, comfortable combining such paradoxical theologies seamlessly, in a way that even surpassed the masterful attempts of the *Sabbatians* to do the same (Liebes n.d.:23).

Before concluding this section, we must briefly explore the role the Vilna Gaon himself had to play in the messianic theology of his students. The Vilna Gaon is well-known but little understood. His inner character, writes Liebes (2016:609), “*except for a few exceptions, is different from the way he is commonly perceived.*”⁶²⁷

The Vilna Gaon had been surprisingly ambivalent when it came to responding to R. Eibeschuetz’s written request that he weigh in on the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy (see section 3.1.7). Although R. Eibeschuetz – who was charged with and convicted of writing *Sabbatian* amulets (Liebes n.d.:17) – claimed that the Vilna Gaon had exonerated him, the fact is that the latter effectively only apologised for not wanting to get involved in the controversy. Leiman (2001:260) suggests this may have been due to the Vilna Gaon’s relatively young age of thirty-five and the great distance between Vilna and Hamburg, the centre of the controversy. Liebes, however, dismisses both Leiman’s suggestions. Instead, he proposes that the Vilna Gaon was not prepared to condemn or “*expose the blatant Sabbatian content*” of the amulets because aspects of them “*may not have been all that far removed from the spirit of the school of the Vilna Gaon*” (Liebes n.d.:17).⁶²⁸ Maciejko (n.d.:79-80) seems to confirm this with evidence that rabbis from both Vilna and Mir in Lithuania supported R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz over R. Yakov Emden.

Turning to his mystical commentaries, the Vilna Gaon was particularly engaged with variant *Kabbalistic* depictions of Moses, who is said to emerge again and again in every generation. Sometimes the ‘new’ Moses is depicted as the final arbiter of the law struggling to create a unified and single umbrella of authoritative *Halachic* practice. This would have resonated with the scholarly and commanding image of the Vilna Gaon. Other times the ‘new’ Moses is depicted as not being so pedantic about

⁶²⁷ Translation is mine.

⁶²⁸ Translation is mine.

Halachic practice and is somewhat of a mystical ‘non-scholar.’ This depiction of Moses did not match that of the Vilna Gaon, and he found other ways to interpret this non-scholarly portrayal of Moses. But other times Moses is depicted as someone despised by the rabbis of the generation. This description of a despised Moses would have resonated with the Vilna Gaon, not as applying directly to himself, but rather as alluding to Shabbatai Tzvi. Liebes understands the Vilna Gaon as identifying particularly with this last description of a despised Moses, and in his present incarnation, he is determined to ‘fix’ the blemishes of parts of his own soul in its previous incarnation as Shabbatai Tzvi. The Vilna Gaon alludes to the *Kabbalistic* notion that Moses can ‘fix’ his previous incarnations (Vilna Gaon, *Biur haHeichalot leGaon, Yahar Or*, 1913:28).

Liebes (2016:604) makes it clear that there are no direct references to Shabbatai Tzvi in the published writings of the Vilna Gaon. This is not surprising, though, because he stuck to a rule that only allowed for citations from traditional Rabbinic and *Zoharic* sources. He would not even quote from the later *Lurianic* sources even though he drew copiously from them. This makes it difficult to know what the Vilna Gaon’s approach was on these matters and whether or not R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov took his intricate messianic theology directly from his teacher.

Nevertheless, Liebes (2016:604, 614) insists that the Vilna Gaon did consider Shabbatai Tzvi to be a major link in the messianic dynasty that may even have represented an aspect of the Gaon himself. This way, Shabbatai Tzvi was considered some manifestation of a previous incarnation of the Vilna Gaon, and now – as the Vilna Gaon – he had an opportunity to rectify Shabbatai Tzvi. Liebes arrives at this conclusion after analysing numerous classical mystical teachings the Vilna Gaon chose to focus on that deal with reincarnations and *Tikunim* of leaders like Moses and R. Akiva. If this rather radical conclusion of Liebes is correct, it shows an unexpected yet fundamental *Sabbatian* influence on the very heart and leadership of the *Mitnagdic* movement. But even if Liebes is not correct, the textual evidence he adduces from the writings of the students of the Vilna Gaon is more than adequate to show a fundamental influence of *Sabbatianism* – even though it required remedy and *Tikun* – on the *Mitnagdic* movement in general.

6.6 Synthesis

Any later theological counter-reaction to an earlier and threatening theology indicates the significant influence and effect the original theology must have had to elicit the response of the counter-theology. In the case of the *Mitnagdim* and the *Sabbatians*, that influence is even stronger because the *Mitnagdim* were prepared to enter the spiritual realms of the original theology, *Sabbatianism*, and elevate, ‘fix’ and release its perceived potential. If the *Mitnagdim* admitted to a latent spiritual potential lying dormant within *Sabbatianism*, and if they were prepared to somehow work with it, this indicates that the influence was not just evident but profound. This is compounded yet further when we consider the theological implications of including such a controversial figure as Shabbatai Tzvi as a *fundamentally necessary* stepping stone in the ambitious cosmic and messianic endeavours of the leaders of the *Mitnagdic* movement.

CHAPTER 7

SYNTHESIS

7.1 Motivation and relevance

I was motivated to undertake this study because *historic theologies* – certainly in the Jewish world and particularly those closer to present times – have a direct bearing on *contemporary theologies*. Despite the popular perception that contemporary theologies are exclusively rooted in the ancient past and have essentially remained unchanged through time, investigations like this study reveal that theologies, instead, are multiple links in longer chains that bind us to the past. Each link is interlocked and has a bearing on the other. *Sabbatianism*, however, was not just a small isolated link because during its peak “almost all” (Zeitlin 1979:100) of the respected rabbis and their followers supported it – and even during its ‘decline,’ large numbers of important rabbis remained committed to, or at least fell under the “allure” (Kahana 2012:589-616) of, the movement. Studying the aftermath of *Sabbatianism* is particularly relevant for these times because it influenced “every significant movement to have emerged in the 18th and 19th century” (Carlebach 1990:15). It remains relevant to this day when

“messianism is again a dominant and urgent theology in the Jewish world which seems to have largely forgotten the facts, let alone lessons of its messianic history” (Michal 2022a:156).

7.2 Research problem

This study had to confront a number of research problems on theological, societal and historical levels. One was that although Shabbatai Tzvi and the Baal Shem Tov were only separated by a short period of time – and people who had seen the former had also seen the latter – most scholarship has refused to connect the two in terms of theological influence even though both were mystical movements.

Another problem was that some scholars did not acknowledge that *Chassidism* was even concerned with messianism. Yet another problem was that as soon as Shabbatai Tzvi was shown to have been a false Messiah, all those who had previously followed him had either revised their history or dramatically reframed it. Civil records

were destroyed on the instruction of both lay and religious leadership. Theological evidence within the religious literature had also been tampered with and censorship was rife to cover up perhaps the greatest messianic upheaval and crisis of Jewish history. These problems were compounded by the fact that four different groups referred to themselves as '*Chassidim*,' and they all operated within the same geographical space and time frame.

Complicating the research problem yet further was the matter of coding used to hide but hint at *Sabbatian* ideas, in the works that actively engaged in some of its teachings. On all levels, therefore, the facts had been hidden. Most scholars, while adducing various theories as to the causes of both *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*, did not always see a causal connection between the two. This study, therefore, had to go against the flow and tenor of most scholarship to present its case. Scholem (1971b:n.p.) described the problem succinctly when he wrote:

“No chapter in the history of the Jewish people during the last several hundred years has been as shrouded in mystery as that of the Sabbatian movement.”

Petrovsky-Shtern (2008:146) was one of the few to recognize a:

“highly complex, murky, and underresearched interaction between...sabbateans and Hasidim.”

This study has been an attempt to fill that “*underresearched*” lacuna.

A technical problem was that much research remained locked within scholarship in the Hebrew language and has never been presented in English. This study, therefore, had to draw on multiple Hebrew primary and academic sources and has presented some of this research in English for the first time. Perhaps the greatest problem, though, remains the very real and inevitable controversial nature of a theologically sensitive study like this.

7.3 Aims and objectives

In this study, I set out to achieve five aims:

- To examine (as per chapter 2) the development, character and spread of post-apostasy *Sabbatian* mysticism as it intersected with the emergence of the *Chassidic* movement; to include the scholarly debate over the causes and

intentions of the *Chassidic* movement; to discuss whether or not *Chassidism* was influenced by the *Sabbatian* movement and to present my *literature and personalities* approach in arguing for that influence.

- To examine (as per chapter 3) the complex structures of a society saturated with secret *Sabbatians* during the period between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*; to examine key personalities like R. Avraham Rovigo, R. Chaim Malach, R. Yehuda Chasid, R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and others for *Sabbatian* gleanings or leanings; to demonstrate that *Sabbatian* influences penetrated well into the eighteenth century.
- To examine (as per chapter 4) the proliferation of mystical and ethical literature that served as conduits for *Sabbatian* ideology, including important works like *Kav haYashar*, *Chemdat Yamim* and *Sefer haTzoref*.
- To examine (as per chapter 5) the reliability of some internal *Chassidic* accounts of its history including *Shivchei haBesht* and the *Kherson Geniza*; and to examine R. Nachman of Breslov's attempt to 'fix' *Sabbatianism*.
- To examine (as per chapter 6) *Sabbatian* influences on the *Mitnagdic* movement as evident in the writings of R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov and other students of (and including) the Vilna Gaon.

7.4 Methodology

The methodology adopted in this literature study has been *descriptive*, *evaluative*, *explanative* and *textual*. The historical background and theological systems and *texts* have not only been *described* and *explained* but subjected to *evaluation* to determine whether or not they fall within the parameters as set out by the hypothesis. In other words, the intention behind the selection of all the research material in this study was to support the prevalence of overt and covert *Sabbatian* influences at the critical moments of confluence of three great theological movements in modern Jewish history, *Sabbatianism*, *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism*. The overarching methodology has been to demonstrate how both the rabbinic *literature* of that period, and the rabbinic *personalities* who produced it – usually leading and influential rabbis – indicate significant *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements. This is in keeping with the subtitle of this study: “an excursion into *messianic Kabbalah* and its *disseminators* in the aftermath of Shabbatai Tzvi.”

7.5 Research results

Chapter 1 introduced the overall style, structure and methodology of this study, including chapter division, orthography, and a list of abbreviations. It described the hypothesis, motivation and relevance, research problem, aims and objectives, to prepare the reader for an enquiry into the legacy of *Sabbatianism*, one of the most powerful movements in Jewish history.

Chapter 2 dealt with the counterintuitive expansion of mystical *Sabbatian* literature and activity in the post-apostasy era when its doctrine was successfully reworked to accommodate the unexpected conversion of the Jewish Messiah to Islam. It described the backdrop of itinerant healers and *Baalei Shem*; dealt with the rise of the *Chassidic* movement within that very milieu; presented a scholarly overview of the causes of *Chassidism*; and introduced the writer's '*rabbinic literature and personalities approach*' which was used throughout this study. The doctrinal adaption of *Sabbatian* theology to the post-Shabbatai Tzvi era, together with the rise of the *Baalei Shem* – many (most?) of whom were *Sabbatian* – together with their concomitant and nascent *Kabbalah*, established a context that was conducive to the birthing of a new movement. Despite this, the literature review highlighted how most scholarship was reluctant to see significant causal connectivity between *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*. However, as a rabbi, and not a sociologist or historian, I focussed more on *rabbinic literature and personalities* to try uncover that connectivity.

Chapter 3 dealt with the structures of a society saturated with *Sabbatian literature*, as well as rabbinic *personalities* who demonstrated the allure *Sabbatian literature* held even for those purported to be mainstream rabbis. It examined the identities and activities of secret *Sabbatians* as well as *Sabbatian* exposers, and demonstrated how major rabbinic personalities like R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, R. Pinchas Katzenellenbogen and many others had interactions, in varying degrees, with *Sabbatianism*. Many of these rabbis can be seen as bridging personalities connecting *Sabbatianism* and *Chassidism*.

Chapter 4 dealt with the proliferation of mystical and ethical literature and explored their usage as possible conduits for *Sabbatian* ideology. It examined well-known works like *Kav haYashar*, *Chemdat Yamim*, *Sefer haTzoref* and others for hidden, and often

unconcealed, *Sabbatian* content. Such works, particularly the *Sefer haTzoref*, were shown to have a direct bearing on not just *Chassidism*, but on the Baal Shem Tov himself. Its author, R. Heshil Tzoref, has been identified by some as R. Adam Baal Shem, the mythical/mystical teacher of the Baal Shem Tov.

Chapter 5 dealt with the question of the reliability of some internal *Chassidic* accounts of its own history including *Shivchei haBesht* and particularly the *Kherson Geniza*. This chapter also examined R. Nachman of Breslov's apparent attempt to 'fix' *Sabbatianism*. It argued that the *Kherson Geniza* was a forgery intended to introduce a bias in favour of a *Chabad* hegemony in *Chassidic* history. It was demonstrated that the possible *historical revisionism* within the *Chabad Chassidic* tradition may have reflected a parallel process of *theological reinterpretation* within the *Breslover Chassidic* tradition – both processes not boding well for the reliability of the claims by internal *Chassidic* sources that they were untouched by *Sabbatianism*.

Chapter 6 dealt with unexpected *Sabbatian* influences on the perceived conservative *Mitnagdic* movement during the early nineteenth century. It examined the writings of the students of the Vilna Gaon and some of the ideology and possible ambivalences of the Vilna Gaon himself when it came to *Sabbatianism*. A common theme was the spiritual rehabilitation of Shabbatai Tzvi and the Christian Messiah. With multiple references in these writings by the students of the Vilna Gaon to Shabbatai Tzvi and *Sabbatian* ideology, it was argued that even the *Mitnagdic* movement was subjected to generally unknown yet intense *Sabbatian* influences.

7.6 Hypothesis

In keeping with my hypothesis and combining the various findings and research results within the different chapters of this study – and after undergoing *theological analyses* of manifold rabbinic *literature* as well as the multiple rabbinic *personalities* who produced and read that literature spanning the periods of Shabbatai Tzvi, the Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon – I hope to have adduced sufficient argument and presented a reasonable body of evidence to validate my hypothesis and state that:

The Chassidic and Mitnagdic movements had fundamentally been subjected to multiple Sabbatian influences through personal rabbinic

contact and causal doctrinal links. Because mysticism always spills over into the public domain (Scholem 1979:69) it has been possible for this study to trace and quantify the extent and significance of these influences.

7.7 Proposal for further study

At the beginning of this study, we noted that:

“Sabbatianism is the matrix of every significant movement to have emerged in the 18th and 19th century, from Hasidism to Reform Judaism, to the earliest Masonic circles and revolutionary idealism” (Carlebach 1990:15).

Liebes (2003:1) similarly notes that *Sabbatianism* is often recognised as the ideological incubator for the movements of *Chassidism*, *Haskala* (the Enlightenment) and modern Zionism. However, with Liebes’ exposure of *Sabbatian* influence on the *Mitnagdim*, particularly on the students of the Vilna Gaon (see sections 6.2 and 6.3) the extent of the *Sabbatian* role in the history of modern Zionism deserves more attention. The students of the Vilna Gaon embarked upon a series of large-scale *Aliyot* during the early nineteenth century and they openly identified with the *Sabbatianism* of their “*fellow Ashkenazim*” who also made *Aliyot* under the *Sabbatian* leader, R. Yehuda Chassid, a century earlier around 1700.⁶²⁹ *Aliya* was an important concept for *Sabbatians* who saw it as part of the process necessary to realise the messianic return of Shabbatai Tzvi. Historically, this often-overlooked *Sabbatian Aliya* is most significant:

“Indeed, the aliyah of Sabbateans around 1700 is often considered the first modern mass-movement of Jews to the Land of Israel, and is thus a precursor of the Zionist project” (Goldish 2018b:519).

Ginsberg (1906:359) points out that many *Sabbatians* “*claimed to be of Palestinian birth,*” demonstrating an awareness of the centrality of belonging to the Land of Israel in *Sabbatian* thought.

⁶²⁹ The expression “*fellow Ashkenazim*” is extracted from a manuscript by R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov. It forms part of the introduction to his *Shaar haTzimtzum* and was published in Frumkin, *Toledot Chachmei Yerushalayim*, vol. 3 (1928-1930:158-9).

Morgenstern (2006) also detects an early form of Zionism in the next wave of *Aliya* a century later by the students of the Vilna Gaon and on the “*instruction*” of the Vilna Gaon. This again raises the issue of the role *Sabbatianism* played in these two early stages of modern Zionism.

Etkes (2004:6), however, contra Morgenstern and Liebes, severely counterclaims that the notion of “*the Gaon of Vilna and his disciples as ‘the first Zionists’*” is a “*myth.*” In the foreword to Etkes’ book, David Biale writes:

“The Gaon of Vilna had no special messianic teaching, Kabbalistic or otherwise. He never gave instructions to his disciples to immigrate to the Land of Israel, especially not for messianic reasons. The whole argument is fabricated...[and] is based on a historical fallacy that seeks to erase the secular modernist origins of Zionism” (Etkes 2024:viii).

To add to the tension over the ideological roots of modern Zionism, in 1899, R. Sholom Dovber Schneerson, the fifth *Chabad Rebbe* – in an initiative that has come to haunt his legacy – equated Zionism with *Sabbatianism*. Under the auspices of the anti-Zionist *Machzikei haDat*, he:

“sponsored the idea of an open attack on the entire Zionist movement... [this led to] thousands of copies of letters signed by well-known rabbis, branding Zionism a Shabbetaean cult that aimed ‘to uproot the tenets of our faith’” (Greenbaum 1995:138).

This was responded to by R. Shmuel Rabinowitz who published documents containing over one hundred signatures of rabbis supporting Zionism. This, in turn, was followed by a book, *Or laYesharim*, which countered with anti-Zionist letters signed by another one hundred rabbis. The latter publication then prompted R. Shloimele haCohen of Vilna to respond:

“The producers of this book have done a great injustice by characterizing 200,000 Jews who believe in Zionism as heretics, disbelievers, and Shabbetaens for they include hundreds of rabbis, eminent scholars and righteous men” (Greenbaum 1995:139).

Whichever way one chooses to interpret these events, the notions of *Sabbatianism* and modern Zionism were included by many important rabbis in the same sentences. Exploring the question, possibility and extent of *Sabbatian influences on the modern Zionist movement* may be a worthwhile matter for further study.

7.8 Conclusion

After examining an unexpectedly large agglomeration of *rabbinic literature* containing overt and covert *Sabbatian* references, and identifying numerous *rabbinic personalities* who produced and read those texts – spanning Shabbatai Tzvi, the Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon – it is difficult *not* to see a common *Sabbatian* thread weaving through this relatively short period of time.

It is important, however, to note that despite their subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) references to *Sabbatian* ideology, the students of the Vilna Gaon, for example – just like R. Nachman of Breslov and some of the other personalities examined in this study – often continued to view Shabbatai Tzvi as the ultimate source of heresy (Liebes 2003:35). Nevertheless, they exhibited a paradoxical mystical theology that essentially justified the use of heretical and unauthorised *Sabbatian* material to *transform* it into ‘holiness.’ This type of post-*Sabbatian* theology is built on the conceptualisation of its ability to *elevate* latent aspects of ‘holiness’ inherent and dormant within the original and heretical *Sabbatian* writings (Liebes n.d.:1).

This rather multi-layered and complex mystical approach suggests the emergence of a new form of what I would describe as a liminal theological space, where aspects of two opposing camps began to merge in both their terminology and theology – while, at the same time emphasising official and sharp distinctions between them (see section 5.4).

The notion of *Sabbatian* influences on the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* movements does not necessarily imply that those movements became *Sabbatian* in essence – although it does not entirely exclude that possibility either. Where exactly these and other groups and personalities positioned themselves within that liminal spectrum, hopefully, will come out clearer in further research. At least for now, the mystical irony suggests that much of this *literature* as well as many of these *personalities* were openly, avowedly and officially anti-*Sabbatian* on one level – while maintaining significant, crucial and sometimes coded *Sabbatian* elements on another level.

That said, regarding other rabbis who were known *Sabbatian* leaders, like R. Heshil Tzoref of Vilna – their *Sabbatianism* and intent to perpetuate the *Sabbatian* movement, was manifest and clear. With them, there was no liminal theological space and they played no small part in the development of *Chassidism* and *Mitnagdism*.

Ultimately, it can be argued that whichever way one chooses to evaluate and interpret the intention and motivation behind all the *rabbinical literature* and of all the *rabbinic personalities* examined in this study, there is one inescapable conclusion:

In whatever formulation or conceptualisation, and whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, there were indeed and undeniably Sabbatian influences on the Chassidic and Mitnagdic movements.

TERMINOLOGIES

Terminologies used in this study are explained as follows:

Aggada

The non-legal aspects of rabbinic literature. “*Ancient Jewish lore forming especially the nonlegal part of the Talmud*” (Merriam Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary).⁶³⁰

Amora

A sage from the Amoraic period (210-450/500 CE) “*A term which designates the ‘interpreter,’ who communicated audibly to the assembled pupils the lessons of the rabbinic teacher. It is also used as a generic term for the rabbis of the post-mishnaic period, whose activities were centered on the interpretation of the Mishnah*” (Shmuel Safrai, Jewish Virtual Library).⁶³¹

Ashkenazim

Jews of German origin. *Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew word for Germany. Today the term is loosely used to apply to all western Jews, to distinguish them from Hispanic and eastern Jews from West Asia, known as *Sefaradim*. “*The name Ashkenaz was applied in the Middle Ages to Jews living along the Rhine River in northern France and western Germany. The center of Ashkenazi Jews later spread to Poland-Lithuania and now there are Ashkenazi settlements all over the world. The term ‘Ashkenaz’ became identified primarily with German customs and descendants of German Jews*” (Shira Schoenenberg, Jewish Virtual Library).⁶³²

Aliya

Literally ‘*going up*.’ The immigration to the Holy Land.

Aveira

Sin.

⁶³⁰ Online source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Aggadah>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

⁶³¹ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/amora>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

⁶³² Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ashkenazim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Aveira Lishema

Literally '*Holy Sin*.' I have capitalised Holy Sin as it is a translation of the Hebrew mystical concept of *Aveira Lishma* (a sin for the sake of Heaven).

Baal Shem

An itinerant wonder worker and theurgical healer active from around the sixteenth century. *Baalei Shem* (plural) were usually seen as members of the lower strata of the unofficial Jewish intelligentsia, "below contract rabbis and study Kabbalists."⁶³³

Birurim

The mystical notion of separating good from evil.

Birur Nitzotzot

The mystical term describing the conceptualisation of '*refining*' or '*brightening*' fallen (spiritual) '*sparks*.'

Chalitza

The rabbinic process that negates the biblical requirement of *Yibum*, or levirate marriage. See *Yibum*.

Chassidei Ashkenaz

A mystical movement founded by R. Yehuda heChassid (1150-1217) that flourished in Germany and France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The movement was influenced by some of the earlier *Merkava* techniques and included some folk Germanic superstitions. "A *Jewish mystical, ascetic movement in the German Rhineland during the 12th and 13th centuries*" (Wikipedia).⁶³⁴

Chassidim

Followers of the *Chassidic* movement (also referred to in this study as *Chassidism*).

Chassidism

⁶³³ Online source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baal_Shem. Retrieved on 01 November 2022.

⁶³⁴ Online source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkenazi_Hasidim. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

The mystical movement that followed in the wake of the ‘revelation’ of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), and continues to this day. Also sometimes referred to as *Hasidism*. Although the term is usually used to describe the *Chassidim* of the Baal Shem Tov, historically, several groups also called themselves Chassidim. These included the twelfth and thirteenth-century *Chassidei Ashkenaz*, or German Pietists around the German Rhineland. During the period on which this study focuses, there were *four* significant sects which all referred to themselves as ‘*Chassidim*’ operating within the same geographical space and time frame; namely, the *Sabbatians*, *Frankists*, the followers of R. Natan Adler of Frankfurt, and the followers of the Baal Shem Tov.

Converso

A Converso is a Jew who outwardly converted to Catholicism but inwardly continued to remain loyal to Judaism. *Conversos* were also known as *crypto-Jews* and *New Christians*. The *Converso* began to emerge in Spain from the time of the persecutions between 1391 and 1492, all those Jews remaining openly true to their faith were expelled from Spanish soil by the Alhambra decree. The *Converso* was also known by the pejorative *Marrano* which means ‘swine’. “[*Converso is the*] designation used in Christian Spain and Portugal for Moorish or Jewish converts to Christianity. It was sometimes applied also to their descendants. Unlike the epithets *Marranos*, *alboraycos*, or *tornadizos*, the term *Conversos* has no derogatory implications” (Jewish Virtual Library).⁶³⁵

Diachronic

“[*R*]elating to the changes in something, especially a language, that happen over time.”⁶³⁶ The diachronic approach can also be described as a historical-critical approach.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁵ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/conversos>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

⁶³⁶ Cambridge Dictionary. Online source: <https://www.bing.com/search?q=DIACHRONIC+%7C+meaning+in+the+Cambridge+English+Dictionary.&form=ANNNB1&refid=cc416c37310e4cfda93fe0a1d34e4f4a>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

⁶³⁷ See footnote 32.

Deveikut

The mystical attachment and cleaving to the divine through prayer and meditation. A form of personal redemption and communication with God to the point of *unio mystica*. “The theological basis of this ideal was the belief, originated in the Kabbalah, that God is omnipresent (‘The whole earth is full of his glory’; Isa. 6:3), and therefore his light dwells even in physical objects, and sparks of that light are captured even in impure and evil objects...Thanks to their charismatic leadership, the tzaddikim obtained authority over the community that basked in their shadow. The simple man, incapable of achieving such a communion with God, is to cling to the tzaddik, become his hasid (adherent, follower) and thus achieve communion indirectly” (Brown 2013:344).

False Messiah

It can certainly be argued that ‘*failed Messiah*,’ or the more neutral expression, ‘*messianic claimant*’ should be used as a description of Shabbatai Tzi. There have been attempts to ‘neutralise’ the messianic component of Shabbatai Tzvi [as we see in the case of the Baal Shem Tov (*Shivchei haBesht* tr. by Ben-Amos and Mintz 1994:86-7)], and to ‘rectify’ Shabbatai Tzvi [as we see in the case of R. Nachman of Breslov (Liebes 1995a)]. Even some of the students of the Vilna Gaon, under R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov – representing the *Mitnagdim* – maintained that Shabbatai Tzvi was the ‘*false messiah*’ as opposed to the Vilna Gaon who now became the ‘*true messiah*’ (Morgenstern 2006:x). Additionally, I choose to use the expression ‘*false Messiah*’ because, under Jewish or *Halachic* law, to qualify as the Messiah, certain basic conditions must be met:

“[T]he Messianic king will...renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty...build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel...the observance of all the statutes will return to their previous state. We will offer sacrifices, observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years according to all their particulars as described by the Torah” (Maimonides, *Hilchot Melachim* 11:1).

If these conditions are not met, then based on these stipulations, a ‘*failed Messiah*’ or ‘*messianic claimant*’ cannot be regarded as the Jewish Messiah – and all the ‘*failed Messiahs*’ and ‘*messianic claimants*’ indeed claimed that they were the actual Messiah. In keeping with this basic and non-mystical *Halachic* conceptualisation of the

Jewish Messiah – and since this study concerns Jewish movements where messianic conceptualisations play a critical role – I use the expression ‘*false Messiah*.’

Galut

Exile

Gaon

The honorific *Gaon* was used for the heads of the Talmudic Academies of Sura and Pumbedita in Babylonia between the sixth and eleventh centuries. It was later also used to describe exceptional rabbis such as the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797).

Ger

A convert to Judaism.

Gematria (plural: *gematriot*)

Numerical value. The Hebrew alphabet carries a numerical value for each of its characters, with *alef*=1, *bet*=2, *gimmel*=3 and so on. There are different and more complicated forms of *gematriot*.

Gershaim

Inverted commas. The post-*Sabbatian* writings of many secret *Sabbatians* adopted a style using *gershaim* on top of words they intended the reader to interpret with coded references to either Shabbatai Tzvi or *Sabbatian* ideology.

Ha’alat Nitzotzot

The mystical term describing the conceptualisation of “elevating” fallen (spiritual) “sparks.”

Hashkafa

A term describing a cultural or popular form of theology often representing various religious and political factions. *Hashkafa* may also mean ‘*worldview*’.

Halacha

Jewish legal and ritual law.

Halachic

Of a legal and ritual nature.

Haskalah

The Jewish Enlightenment movement was dominant in Central and Eastern Europe between around 1770 and 1881, ending with the rise of Jewish nationalism. “*Literally, Haskalah comes from the Hebrew word sekhel, meaning ‘reason or intellect’ and the movement was based on rationality. It encouraged Jews to study secular subjects, to learn both the European and Hebrew languages, and to enter fields such as agriculture, crafts, the arts and science*” (Shira Schoenenberg, Jewish Virtual Library).⁶³⁸

Haskama

Pl. *Haskamot*. Approval as in a written endorsement of a book.

Kabbalah

Jewish mysticism. In *Talmudic* times (0-500 CE) and post-*Talmudic* times until the thirteenth century, Jewish mysticism was known as *Heichalot* (*Palaces*) and *Merkavah* (*Chariot*) literature. It later took the form of *Zoharic* literature with the publication of the *Zohar* in around 1290. From the sixteenth century, the *Zohar* was largely presented through the prism of R. Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (1534-1572) and became known as *Lurianic Kabbalah*. From the time of the Baal Shem Tov, *Kabbalah* was made more accessible to the masses with the development of *Chassidut* (the mystical literature of the Chassidim).

Kelipot

Literally ‘*Husks*.’ The mystical notion of negative *husks* or *shells* which cover up and hide the inner essence.

Lurianic Kabbalah

The mystical doctrines of R. Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (1534-1572) and his students. R. Luria is also known as the Ari and is considered the father of modern Jewish

⁶³⁸ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-haskalah> Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

mysticism (*Kabbalah*). He was based in Safed in the Galilee region of Ottoman Syria, now northern Israel.

Marrano

A pejorative for converso (see Converso).

Maskilim, Haskala

Members of the Jewish Enlightenment movement (*Haskala*). The movement was active between the 1770's and 1881.⁶³⁹

Merkava and Heichalot literature

An early, pre-*Zoharic* form of mysticism as practised in *Talmudic* and post-*Talmudic* times up to the thirteenth century.

Mezuza

Pl. *Mezuzot*. Scrolls containing scriptural verses (Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21) inserted into a rectangular covering and affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes.

Midrash

Pl. *Midrashim*. A style of biblical exegesis that expands the text from its narrow and literal meaning. The earliest *Midrashim* come from the second-century AD, although much of their content is older.

Mitzvot

Commandments or religious observances. Rabbinic Judaism requires the theoretical fulfilment of 613 *Mitzvot*. Not all are applicable today as some depend on factors such as the existence of the Temple.

Perushim

Literally 'Ascetics' or 'Separatists'. In this study, the name *Perushim* refers to the group of disciples of the Vilna Gaon who *separated*, ideologically, from the *Chassidim*, and who immigrated to the Holy Land after 1808. Historically, *Perushim* also refers to the earlier Pharisees active during the Second Temple times.

⁶³⁹ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-haskalah>. Retrieved 28 April 2024.

Rebbe

A *Rebbe* is the designation for the leader of a *Chassidic* group or sect. The *Rebbs* usually follow a dynasty model of succession where the son or son-in-law of a deceased *Rebbe* is the next in line for the leadership position.

Reish Galuta

Reish Galuta is Aramaic for *Rosh Galut* (Hebrew), the *Head of the Exile* or *Exilarch* (Greek loan translation). While the Jews were in exile in Babylonia in post-Second Temple times, the leadership was divided between a religious figure, the *Gaon*, and a political figure, the *Reish Galuta*. Technically the *Reish Galuta* had roots going back to the First Temple era. The *Reish Galuta* was held in high esteem as he represented the Davidic dynasty. “*The government of Babylonian Jewry for the first 12 centuries C.E. lay in the hands of the exilarch*” (Jewish Virtual Library).⁶⁴⁰

Sabbatianism

The mystical movement that followed in the wake of the ‘revelation’ of the messianic claimant Shabbatai Tzvi (1626-1676), and continued long after his death and well into the twentieth century.

Sabbatian Kabbalah

The mystical doctrines produced by the leaders of the *Sabbatian* movement, particularly those of R. Natan of Gaza (1643–1680) and R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (c.1626–1706).

Sefaradim

Jews of Spanish origin. Today the term is also used to describe eastern Jewish communities of West Asia. “The descendants of Jews who left Spain or Portugal after the 1492 expulsion are referred to as Sephardim. The word ‘Sephardim’ comes from the Hebrew word for Spain, Sepharad...” (Rebecca Weiner, Jewish Virtual Library).⁶⁴¹

Sefer Torah

⁶⁴⁰ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/exilarch>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

⁶⁴¹ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sephardim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Pl. *Sifrei Torah*. A handwritten scroll of the *Torah* (*Pentateuch*) from which the weekly Torah portions are read in the synagogue.

Sefirot

The mystical conceptualisations of ten divine *emanations*, or *spheres*, through which the Ein Sof (Infinite One) manifests, and continuously creates all forms of existence outside of itself.

Siddur

Prayer-book.

Shabbat

The Jewish Sabbath.

Shaar Blat

Frontispiece or title page of a book.

Shechina

God's presence

Shiryon

Armour. In the context of this study, *Shiryon* is used to refer to a mystical concept in R. Nachman of Breslov's once-secret writings, '*Maaseh miShiryon*.' In this sense, a *Shiryon* is said to protect so efficiently "*that when they kill you, you will come alive again; and then if they kill you once again, you will come alive again*" (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Maaseh miShiryon*, in *Hitgalut veTikun*, Mark 2011:186).

Synchronic

"[R]elating to something, especially a language, at a particular point in time, without considering how it developed to that point" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Tana

Pl. Tannaim. A sage from the *Tanaic* period (10-220 CE). “*The period of the Tannaim, which lasted about 210 years (10-220 C.E.), is generally divided by Jewish scholars into five or six sections or generations...*” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia).⁶⁴²

Tefilin

Phylacteries. Leather straps wound around the arm and worn during the morning services on weekdays.

Tikun

The mystical notion of *restoration* or *fixing*, often of holy sparks which had fallen from their former glory.

Tosafist

A rabbi of the *Tosafist* period - spawned by Rashi (1040-1105) - lasted about two hundred years, encompassing the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and ending with R. Meir of Rothenburg (d. 1293). The term *Tosafists* generally refers to the rabbis of the early period of the *Rishonim* (1038-1500) who lived specifically in *Ashkenaz* (Northern France and Germany). The word *Tosafot* can also refer to a body of exegetical literature defined as: “*Critical and explanatory glosses on the Talmud, printed, in almost all editions, on the outer margin and opposite Rashi's notes. The authors of the Tosafot are known as Tosafists ('ba'ale ha-tosafot')*” (Joseph Jacobs and M. Seligsohn, 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia).⁶⁴³

Tzitzit

A four-cornered garment with ritually wound fringes on each corner.

Yibum

Levirate marriage. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 specifies that the brother of a man who died before producing children must marry his brother's widow. ‘*Levir*,’ is Latin for

⁶⁴² Online source: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14240-tannaim-and-amoraim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

⁶⁴³ Online source: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14457-tosafot>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

'husband's brother.' Online source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/levirate>. Retrieved on 08 April 2024. See *Chalitza*.

Yeshiva

Pl. *yeshivot*. A Jewish religious school or academy.

Zohar

A foundational mystical work that was first published in Spain around 1290. Traditionally the work is said to have been authored by Shimon bar Yochai an early *Tana* in the second century CE. Academic research, however, indicates it may have been authored one thousand years later by Moshe de León (1240-1305):

“I have come to accept in substance the contention of Graetz – itself only the most articulate expression of a whispered tradition of centuries – that the Spanish Kabbalist Moses de Leon must be regarded as the author of the Zohar” (Scholem 1941a:159).

This was the dominant scholarly view until it was challenged by Yehuda Liebes in the 1980s who suggested a theory of multiple authors, instead:

“The Zohar is the fruit of a whole group that together dealt with the Kabbalah on the basis of a common tradition and ancient texts” (Liebes 1988:5).

The authorship of this important mystical source remains a contentious issue today.

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Exodus 12:38

Exodus 17:16

Exodus 34:7

Numbers 14:24

Numbers 14:37

Numbers 20:19

Numbers 21:9

Numbers 23:21

Numbers 24:16

Deuteronomy 1:5

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Deuteronomy 11:13–21

Deuteronomy 25:5-10

Deuteronomy 31:12

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b. *Sanhedrin* 99b
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⁶⁴⁴ Online source: דברי האדון [יעקב פראנק] / אלמונית, יעקב פרנק / פניה שלום - פרויקט בן-יהודה (benyehuda.org) Retrieved 17 March 2024.

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