

### The Birth of a Myth

To be a Sabbatean implies a "triple loyalty" shared between :

- the ethnic and hereditary link with Judaism,
- the belief in the basic tenets of Sabbateanism,
- the commitment to the Turkish nation.

It should be emphasized that the Jewish features of the Community of "Believers" (1), as Sabbateans called themselves, have been preserved during the course of history. The reasons for this are both ideological and circumstantial.

Messianic expectations which spurred the development of the Sabbatean movement in the 17th century are rooted in the consciousness of the Jewish people of whom the Sabbateans were an integral part. Therefore, their identification with and even their commitment to the destiny of the Jewish people represent a basic and existential condition.

Circumstances also supported this. It is assumed that many of the sages of Israel continued to adhere to Sabbatean principles and that, as a result, mutual ties were developed and maintained between both sides. In the city of Salonika in which the majority of the community lived until 1924, both the vibrant Jewish environment and the prevalent tolerance which they enjoyed, contributed to preserve and maintain those autochthonic Jewish features.

This, however, is no sufficient ground to claim that at the beginning of the 20th century Sabbatean Believers were willing to actively support the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel, for the obvious reason that the land of Israel was part of the Ottoman Empire.

And yet, during that period, because of the high standing of Sabbatean community members in the political sphere, a myth was created regarding their ties with Judaism. This myth, which was a far cry from the intentions of the Sabbateans, was eventually to serve Zionist interests at a large stage.

In 1908, Turkey underwent the "Young Turks" revolution. This revolution was ideologically rooted in the principle of the equality of rights among the peoples of the Empire, the right to freedom of expression and the aspiration to unity through affiliation to the Ottoman nation. It limited the absolute sovereignty of the Ottoman dynasty which had been ruling for about six centuries, and led to far-reaching changes in the social and political spheres.

In the international arena, England began to fear that it would lose control over its gateways to India, its greatest and most important colony. This fear was well-founded because the ways to India passed through Mesopotamia and Egypt which were geopolitically situated within the sphere of Turkish domination or influence. It is also necessary to remember that in 1903, the Ottoman government had already signed an agreement with Germany to build a railway line between Berlin and Baghdad.

The Young Turks Revolution served as a source of inspiration to Asian peoples aspiring the national emancipation. Leaders of the Revolution promoted the interests of these peoples and cooperated, among others, with Egyptian leaders attempting to free Egypt from British control.

Germany emerged, at that time, as the rival challenging British supremacy. Then, England began to consider the Jewish power as a factor of cardinal importance, able to affect and even to determine the course of events.

John Buchan, who was appointed Director of Information for the British Government during the World War I, described the leadership of the "Committee of Union and Progress", the Young Turks official organization, as "a collection of Jews and Gypsies" and the government as "the tool of World Jewry". The term "Jew" hinted at Sabbatean Mehmet Djavit, Minister of Finance and the term "Gypsy" at Mehmet Talât, Minister of the Interior, both of them leading figures of the Revolution.



Emanuel Karasu

there were Jewish and Sabbatean members in the Committee of Union and Progress, the British Ambassador, Sir Gerald Lowther, in his report of 1910, referred to the Committee as "the Jewish Committee of Union and Progress" and, in this same report stated that "the Oriental Jews is an adept at manipulating occult forces ...". He described Talât and Djavit as "the official manifestations of the occult power of the Committee".

Ambassador Lowther also wrote that because of the pogroms in Russia at the same period, "Jews hate Russia and its government" and stressed the danger that England's rapprochement with Russia would bring international Jewry closer to Germany, the enemy of England, and that Germany, likely to use the settlement of Jews in the Middle East to broaden and strengthen its influence in the region at the expense of Great Britain, would then grant its protection to the Zionist cause.

Ambassador Lowther words were exact version of the appraisals made by Gerald Fitz Maurice, a devout Catholic of Irish descent, who had been living for many years in Turkey and served as chief interpreter at the Embassy as well as

adviser to the Ambassador on Middle East Affairs.

The Young Turks Revolution originated and was fomented in Salonika, a city of 140,000 inhabitants of whom 80,000 were Jews and 20,000 Sabbatean Believers (2). A widespread activity by the Order of the Freemasons, which was ideologically compatible with the aspirations of the Jews and Sabbateans occurred at the time in the city. The Jews were displeased with the antagonist attitude of Sultan Abdülhamit II towards Zionism and the Sabbateans found in the Freemason concept of "universal brotherhood and tolerance" a suitable channel for Messianic tenets. As to the Young Turks, they too were displeased with the Ottoman Sultan for having dissolved the Parliament and conducting a policy of tyranny. Emanuel Karasu, a Jewish lawyer who presided over the Order of the Freemasons in Macedonia, conferred on them his protection by providing them with the possibility to organize and act within the framework of the Masonic lodges. Thus, many Jews and Sabbateans who belonged to those same lodges also found themselves affiliated to the Young Turks Movement.

The first governments formed after the Revolution included three ministers and a deputy minister of Sabbatean origin : Mehmet Djavit, Nüzhet Faik, Mustafa Arif and Muslihittin Adil, and a Jewish minister : Cad Abulafia. Several other Jews occupied important positions as undersecretaries, such as Nissim Russo in the Ministry of Finances, and as high ranking functionaries in key ministries. In the reconvened 300-seat Ottoman Parliament there were four Jews, Vitali Faradj, Emanuel Karasu, Nissim Mazliyeh and Hezkie Sassun. Behor Ashkenazi was the only Jewish member of the Senate. The number of Jews among Young Turks was relatively large because many of them had been active in the Freemason lodges. Their presence was especially conspicuous because it contrasted sharply with their former image of a politically uninvolved community.

All this led the interpreter Fitz Maurice to believe that international Zionism was behind the Revolution and that it had gained control over the Young Turks through the Freemason order. He came to the conclusion that the revolution itself was a Zionist conspiracy with imperialistic aspirations aiming at the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Fitz Maurice assumptions were mistaken. They were the result of three main fallacies :

- It is true that a considerable number of Jews were active in political life at the time, but their power to influence imperial policy was limited. In matters as sensitive as Jewish settlement in Palestine, which meant the establishment of a Jewish state on the ruins of the disintegrating Empire, silence was preferable to any outspoken opinion (3). As to the Sabbateans, they wished to strengthen their standing in the Ottoman society an

even it they were apparently free to express their views they had no convenient reason to become openly involved with the Zionist cause;

- Germany's readiness to promote Jewish settlement in the Middle East was also doubtful. The idea did not gain full support because the Germans knew that the Turks were very sensitive to any impending threat to its sovereignty over countries still under its rule, the attempt to settle Jews in Palestine implying just this kind of threat. In addition, such settlement plans did not rate high on the agenda of higher political circles in Germany, and the matter was considered to be of minor importance;
- Fitz Maurice's assumption that Djavit and Talât supported Germany was contrary to the facts. Djavit headed the pro-British faction within the Committee. He had met with Churchill, and in 1911 offered to sign a treaty with Britain. But the Foreign Office did not accept the offer. In 1914, when a majority was formed in the Committee to support the participation of the Ottoman Empire to the war on the side of Germany, Djavit remained in the opposition. Nor was Talât very enthusiastic about Turkey's alignment with Germany, but he reluctantly supported the idea in order to maintain his position in the ruling establishment.

The British Foreign Office accepted the conclusions and recommendations of Fitz Maurice, and in 1913 made contact with Sokolow in order to create a pro-British faction within the Zionist movement. At the start of World War I Fitz Maurice, who still held on to his views, reached another farfetched conclusion: that Jewish support would enable England win the war and, in order to secure such support England should commit itself to the establishment of a national homeland for Jews in Palestine.

This assumption was also credulously adopted by the Foreign Office, and in 1917, when it became known that an article had been published in the Berlin Press recommending that Germany support the Zionist Movement in order to distance it from England, which had been trying with its assistance to gain control over the Egypt-Palestine bridgehead, England was ripe and ready to announce its Balfour Declaration recognizing the right of the Jewish nation to establish a homeland in Palestine.

Rare are those events in history which aroused such high hopes and lead to such deep disanchantment, with such far-reaching consequences as the Young Turks Revolution. Progress it brought, but Unity was shattered. Many of the nations under Ottoman rule revolted and fulfilled their aspirations to self-determination and independence, while all dreams for a united Ottoman nation were lost forever.

The disintegration of the Empire left it an easy prey for the Great Powers. Yet those very powers that had once united under the Christian

banner against the invading infidel, were unable to agree among themselves over the inheritance gained from the same infidel whom they had regarded as "the sick man of Europe".

What also interests us here is to try to understand why the Sabbatean Believers were so easily drawn into the process leading to the Revolution. The answer to this is to be found in the messianic hope that promised a new social order similar to that of the revolutionary idea. The desire to be free of antiquated dogmas found a welcome substitute in revolutionary values such as secularism, freedom of expression and social equity. Seeking freedom from confinement within their own community, they had already been wandering for a few decades in quest of a new identity. Then, active adherence to the cause of the Young Turks offered them an eligible solution.

It should not be forgotten that Zionist leaders such as David Ben Gurion and Itzhak Ben Zvi were so favourably impressed with the reformatory tendencies of the Revolution that on the eve of World War I they supported the idea of defending Eretz Israel on the side of the Ottoman Government and of establishing of a Jewish settlement there under Ottoman auspices.

In the 17th century, another myth had emerged in order to justify the conversion to Islam of Sabbetai Sevi, the central figure of the Sabbatean movements, and of all those who followed his example. The conversion was interpreted as an attempt to restore to God the divine sparks scattered throughout the nations, thus bringing about the Redemption of Israel. Could this myth be linked with the one created about the Sabbateans at the beginning of the 20th century, and could we regard the values for which the Sabbateans stood in that period as those same holy sparks that would bring Redemption?

Clearly, such a question cannot be answered by means of rational deduction or historical dialectic. As to the reply by mystic speculators, it would probably be one of embarrassment, or at best, one of reservation. Yet it is not possible to overlook the Sabbatean element within the course of a historical determinism which engendered the realization of the Zionist dream.

Three facts should be noted here: that in 1909 Djavit met Jacobson and Rupp in order to deal with the question of Jewish settlement in Palestine; that the government under the leadership of Talât and Djavit fell in 1911 because it was accused of collaboration with the Zionists; that the government under the same re-elected leadership decided at the beginning of



Melmet Djavit

1914 to cancel the limitations against Jewish settlement in Palestine. Djavit, along with Emanuel Karasu and Nissim Russo, was included among those Young Turks leaders whom Britain wished to eliminate by shameful underhand means, but without success, in 1913.

What must have been going on in the depths of his soul when Djavit faced a decision regarding Zionism, we shall never know. But it is clear that he could not have remained indifferent when Jewish destiny was at stake.

Djavit lost his life when he was condemned to the gallows for alleged conspiracy against the founder of Modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, an outstanding revolutionary and reformer who has often been said to have had some Sabbatean origins himself. And so the chapter closes on a figure who fought loyally for those values he believed in.

Does the State of Israel owe an unpaid debt to Djavit? It may be too early to answer such a question but perhaps it is also much too late! ■

(\* Lecture presented at the "Congress on the Idea of Nationhood in the Sephardi Diaspora". Yad Tabenkin, Israel, in December 21-23, 1992.

- (1) The popular and a deprecatory term "Deunmeh" is used by Turks to designate the members of the Sabbatean community. For Jews they were "ha-Minim" - the dissidents. They called themselves "ha-Ma'aminim", which in Hebrew means "the Believers".
- (2) These numbers are reported by Oke, p. 124. Fromkin reports that about half of the 130,000 inhabitants were either Jews or Sabbateans, p. 41.
- (3) In a conversation held between Jacobson and Faradji in 1910 on the question of using the influence of Jewish members within the Committee in order to support Jewish settlement in the Empire, and particularly in Palestine, Faradji replied that "...in such matters nothing must be said, but done" as cited by Veiner in *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882*, p. 276.

#### References:

- Fromkin, David, *A Peace to End all Peace, The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Middle East*, Avon Books, New York, 1990.
- Galante, Avram, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, Isis, Istanbul.
- Oke, Dr. Mim Kemal, *Siyonizm ve Fillistim Sorunu (1880-1914)* Uç Dal Nesriyat, Istanbul, 1966.
- Scholem, Cershom, *Kabbalah, A Meridian Book*, New American Library, Ontario.
- Veiner Hannah in *Toldot Hayeshuv haYehudi beEretz-Israel miaz ha-Aliyah ha-Rishona, ha-Tkufa ha-Otmanit Helek Rishon* (The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882, the Ottoman Period Part One) Lissak Moshe, Cohen Gavriel, Editors-in-Chief, Kolatt Israel, Editor, The Israel Academy for Sciences and Humanities, The Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1989.
- Weiker, Walter F., *Ottomans Turks and the Jewish Polity*, University Press of America, The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jerusalem, 1992.