

# The Shabbatean Movement

## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

By the seventeenth century Lurianic mysticism had made an important impact on Jewish life, and expectations of messianic redemption were widespread. During this period the arrival of Shabbatai Zevi electrified the Jewish community. Throughout the Jewish world Jews believed that Shabbatai was the long-awaited redeemer who would bring about the messianic age. In 1666 Shabbatai travelled to Constantinople where he was arrested and put into prison. Undeterred by his arrest, pilgrims from all over the world went to Constantinople. Not all Jews, however, were persuaded of Shabbatai's messiahship. The kabbalist Nehemiah ha-Kohen, for example, denounced him to the authorities. Eventually Shabbatai was given the choice between conversion to Islam or death. When he converted, his followers were dismayed, yet he explained that he was simply following God's will.

Some of his disciples remained loyal to Shabbatai. Some believed it was not Shabbatai who had become a Muslim but a phantom had taken on his appearance. Others, influenced by Lurianic mysticism, thought that the messianic task required a descent into the realm of evil in order to liberate the divine sparks. Following Shabbatai's death in 1676, a number of groups continued to believe that Shabbatai was the Messiah including the *Doenmeh* (dissidents) who were outwardly Muslims but privately followed their own traditions. In time, however, they evolved into anti-nomian groups that violated Jewish sexual laws and asserted the divinity of Shabbatai and their leader, Baruchiah Russo.

In the eighteenth century another sect, led by Jacob Frank, observed a deviant form of Shabbateanism. Believing himself to be an incarnation of Shabbatai, Frank declared that he was the second person of the Trinity. In the 1750s disputations were held between

the Frankists and traditional Jews. Later Frank expressed his willingness to become a Christian and he and his followers were baptized. However, when the clergy became aware of Frank's trinitarian beliefs, he was imprisoned. In considering these developments in Jewish life, you should reflect on the degree to which human beings are able to rationalize their beliefs. Many of Shabbatai's followers were unable to abandon their messianic hopes. As we have seen, they rationalized Shabbatai's act of apostasy. Using kabbalistic concepts, they sought to harmonize Shabbatai's conversion to Islam with kabbalistic ideas about divine emanation. Both the *Doenmeh* and the Frankists similarly continued to believe in Shabbatai's messiahship and formulated their own theological systems. Why is it that human beings engage in such tortuous explanations when their beliefs do not fit the facts? Is such self-deception an inevitable feature of human life?

## THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google. Search for information about Shabbatai Zevi, the *Doenmeh* and the Frankists, such as <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/judaism/shabb.html>.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Type in Shabbatai Zevi.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with Shabbatai Zevi and Shabbateanism.
- Imagine that you are a follower of Shabbatai Zevi. Write a letter to a relative explaining why you continue to believe in his messiahship despite his conversion.

## TIPS TO TEACHERS

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- Have a debate. One side should criticize Shabbatai's act of apostasy; the other side should defend his action in kabbalistic terms.
- Invite a psychologist speak to your class about human rationalization. Have a discussion about the attitudes of Shabbatai's followers who continued to believe in him.