

**EXPLORING THE PAGAN, JEWISH AND OTTOMAN ROOTS  
OF THE “SABBATEAN LAMB FESTIVAL”**

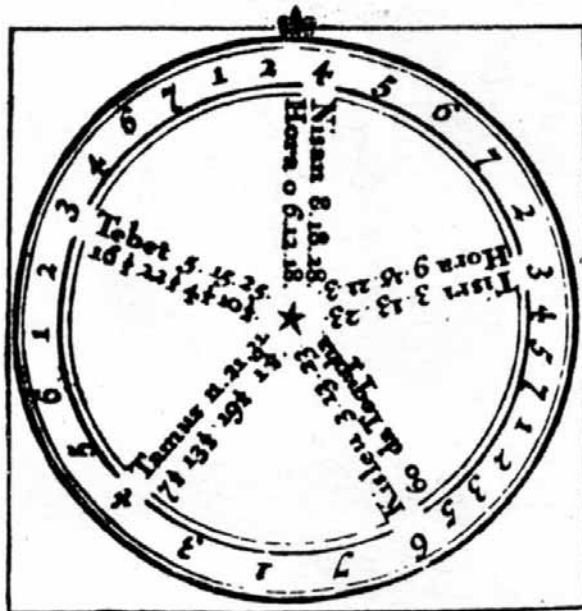
*Gad Nassi*

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*"He who extracts the rose from the thorn  
Can also turn this winter into spring.  
He who exalts the heads of the cypresses  
Is able also out of sadness to bring joy."  
Mevlana Celalettin Rumi, Mesnevi*  
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## Circulo de las Tecufot.

La qual sirve tambien para la Bendición de las tu-  
vías perpetuamente.

Industria de R. Selomo de Oliveira.



Porquanto en las Bendiciones deste  
Libro a hojas 232. se habla  
de la Tecufa del Sol de 28. a 28. años; sera  
tuer-

Jewish calendar representing the Equinoxes and Solstices, known as *Tekufoth*. From the book "Seder Berakhot – Orden de las Bendiciones y las Ocasiones en que se Devan Dizir", printed in Hebrew with Portuguese to teach Judaism to Conversos. Edited by Isaac de Mattatias Aboab. Translated by Binyanin Senior. Printed in the printing house Albert Magnus, Amsterdam 1686(7). Author's collection.



Picture depicting Hacı Bektaş Veli, the founder of the Bektashi Order. Author's collection.

*“The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down beside the kid...” (Isaiah 11: 6)*

Based on its roots and its mode of celebration, the “*Sabbatean Spring Festival*”, usually known as the “*Lamb Festival*”<sup>(1)</sup>, remains the most puzzling and eccentric holiday of the Sabbatean lore.

This feast began at midnight between the 21<sup>st</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the month of *Adar*, at the supposed occurrence of the spring equinox. According to the Sabbatean tradition, the spring equinox represents the beginning of the New Year and the creation of the world. Only married couples were permitted to participate in the ceremony, where the meat of the lamb was eaten for the first time in the year. It was required that at least two married couples or a paired number of married couples participated in the ceremony. Women wore jewels and their best clothes and served at the banquet. At a certain moment, lights were extinguished and the couples would apparently make love after exchanging partners.<sup>(2)</sup>

## **CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

### **Pagan**

Throughout history, most pagan religions and cultures considered time as cyclical. The condition and fate of mankind were therefore explained through events occurring at specific times. Certain days or time periods of sacred significance were celebrated by usually including a particular ritual of sacrifices and meals that at times bordered or led to licentious behavior. Among these, festivals celebrating the creation process and the renewal of nature are of particular interest. They have been celebrated in recorded history for more than five millennia. In ancient Mesopotamia, Sumerians and Babylonians celebrated the renewal of nature indicated by spring rains, as well as by the returning of the rains in autumn. Food sacrifices were dedicated to fertility deities, after which the participants marked their feasting by ritual ceremonies.

In Babylon, the Creation epic was read at this occasion, to remind the celebrants that order arose out of chaos by means of a struggle between the god of heaven and the goddess of the deep. Later, a sheep was beheaded, its body being thrown into the river, and its head taken into the wilderness. This ritual symbolized the freeing of the community from the powers of chaos. After the populace engaged in carnival-like activities, a banquet was held to celebrate the renewal of nature, man and society.<sup>(3)</sup>

Beliefs and rituals connected with seasonal renewals, and associated with an encounter of a chaotic and sexual nature between deities, have existed in a variety of cultures<sup>(4)</sup>. They are almost a universal phenomenon, which is embedded in the symbolic spiritual legacy and collective memory of

the euro-asian peoples and, has played a major role in determining their mystical and religious inclinations and beliefs.

Similarly, in Persian and Zoroastrian mythology, the annual seasonal renewal festival of *Nevruz* is celebrated in the spring season. This is a solemn and joyful feasting of new life in nature and of the anticipated resurrection of the body when the world will be restored to its original and intended goodness – after the defeat of the spirit of evil and chaos.<sup>(3)</sup>

### **Jewish**

Superstitious beliefs connected with the periods of the equinoxes and the solstices have also appeared in Jewish folklore. The Hebrew word *tekufah* – used in plural as, *tekufoth* –, which literally means, period and also “season” refers to the annual seasonal changes. The four *tekufoth* are: in the month of *Nissan* (April) at the spring equinox; in the month of *Tammuz* (July) at the summer solstice; in the month of *Tishri* (September/October) at the autumnal equinox; in the month of *Teveth* (December) at the winter solstice. The *Midrash of Psalms* reports: “*There are four seasons in a year. From the season of Nissan to the of Tammuz the days borrow from the nights (i.e. the sun lights for a longer time), and from Tammuz to Tishri the days pay back to the nights; from Tishri to Teveth days borrow from the nights but from Teveth to Nissan the days pay back to the nights: which makes that the season of Nissan and of Tishri owe nothing to anyone...*”<sup>(6)</sup>

The Greek god Adonis, who was distinguished for his great beauty, was originally a deity of the Phœnicians. His name is derived from the Phœnician and Hebrew word *Adon*, meaning lord. The myth tells that *Astarte* – recognized also as *Aphrodite* or *Venus* - fell in love with him. While he was hunting in the forests of Lebanon, *Adonis* was killed by a wild boar, sent deliberately to attack him. Greatly distressed, *Astarte* caused a river of blood to spring from his body. *Persephone* restored him to life, but he had to spend six months of the year with her in the Lower World. The other six months he could spend above the earth with *Astarte*. In commemoration of *Adonis* the Phœnicians instituted a festival that began with the lamentations of women followed by frantic rejoicings mingled with the grossest debauchery to express the death and resurrection of *Adonis*. The central worship of *Adonis* was at Byblos, in the vicinity of where a river, which was said since at that time to turn red. This belief held that this redness - possibly due to sandy soil - came from the blood of *Adonis*, and the river became known as the *Adonis* River. The worship of *Adonis* later spread throughout the Mediterranean area<sup>(6)</sup>, including Palestine, and then to the Jewish world. In Palestine, it became

known as the cult of *Tammuz*, the Babylonian name for *Adonis*, and the period of the festival has been considered as the unluckiest time of the year. Ezekiel refers to this cult in his vision:

*“Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord’s house which was toward the north; and behold there sat the women weeping for Tammuz”* (Ezekiel, 8: 14).

The belief gained acceptance among the Jews, to a point that it was noted by scholars such as Hai Gaon (939-1038) of Pumbedita, Abraham Ibn Ezra (c.1150-1167) of Cordoba, Judah the Pious (c.1150-1217) of Speyer and David Ben Joseph Abudarham (14<sup>th</sup> cent.) of Toledo. In a controversial reply, Hai Gaon explains this custom, noticing that:

*“Although we do not know the reason, it should be meticulously observed, for not without good reason has it spread in Israel”*. Then he proceeded to offer the prevailing explanation to the effect that during the four seasons of the year the universe was guarded by appointed angels, but at the *tekufoth*, the time of the changing of the watch, when their supervision is momentarily relaxed, the powers of evil work havoc among men by poisoning their wells.

Gradually, by the intervention of the Prophets and the Rabbis of the *Talmud*, the worship of *Adonis* was eradicated in Israel. However, even if the original myth was forgotten, its remnants were preserved in the belief that waters were contaminated by noxious blood, whereby it was prohibited to drink water at the time of the *tekufoth*. Jews believed that a venomous drop of blood falling from the heaven at the period of the summer solstice poisoned the waters in streams and rivers, and then refrained from drinking water in this period.

An old legend, which made its first literary appearance in the *Mahzor* (liturgical book) *Vitry*, during the twelfth century, connects this belief with the following biblical events: God turned the waters of Egypt to blood in the spring equinox, and from then on at the time of the equinox drops of blood are deposited on the waters; the same occurs at the summer solstice, when Moses smote the rock and blood flowed from it; at the autumnal equinox; when Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, blood appeared on his knife; and at the winter solstice, when Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in the fulfillment of his vow to God, her blood mixed with the waters.<sup>(5, 7)</sup>

The Ritual of Abudarham (written c. 1341) bears the following information: *“During seasonal changes it is prohibited to drink the waters of the rivers, for a drop a blood falling from the clouds in the sky*

would swell the body of anyone who drinks from”. A Jewish mystical belief is that Lilith’s<sup>(9)</sup> menses are the source of these drops. Still another legend is that the constellations Scorpio and Leo, or Cancer and Libra engage in a bitter struggle at these four critical moments, and their blood stains the waters.<sup>(7)</sup> According to a Coptic belief, on Midsummer’s Day, the archangel Michael discharges a drop into the Nile which makes its water undrinkable. Another remark by the same author points to the belief that during *Nissan* (the month in which the spring equinox occurs) a poisonous, jelly-like substance falls on the vegetation.<sup>(10)</sup>

According to one theory, the very first *tekufah* – the spring equinox – in the Jewish calendar took place on *Adar 22* at the beginning of Wednesday, the fourth day of the Jewish week, i.e. Tuesday evening at 6 p.m. in the first year world’s creation<sup>(11)</sup>. A book published in Amsterdam in 1636 contains informative and depictive material on the *Tekufoth*<sup>(12, see also picture)</sup>. Moreover, according to another publication, beliefs concerning the *tekufoth* were probably still extant among European Jewry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>(13)</sup>.

The enlightened religious authorities saw the beliefs on *Tekufoth* as a remnant of paganism, denounced them and tried to suppress them. However these efforts did not prove to be successful<sup>(7, 8)</sup> and, as a matter of fact, the belief regarding the noxious effect of drinking water drawn at nighttime during the *tekufoth* persisted among simple Jewish folk until recently.

### **Ottoman**

A peculiar fact in connection with the “*Sabbatean Lamb Festival*” is that it is celebrated during the same season as *Nevruz*, which is a millenarian, well-established and very popular pagan festival in Turkey and also having analogical aspects with the former. *Nevruz* means “New Year” in Persian. This festival and its variations are widespread among peoples inhabiting the rural areas of the former Ottoman Empire as well as among peoples ethnically and culturally related to them living elsewhere.

The beginning of the New Year in *Nevruz* is also linked with many biblical themes of deliverance: creation of the world by God, when the duration of night is equal to day; the formation of out mud of the first man, Adam; the return of Adam and Eve to Paradise by God, after He forgave them; Noah, after leaving his ark, set foot on land; Joseph was saved from the pit; Moses divided the Red Sea to save his people; Jonah was delivered to land by the whale; the stars which were in Aries when

God created the Universe were ordered by Him to return to their own zodiac signs.<sup>(14)</sup>

*Hidrellez* is another widespread joyful popular festival announcing the beginning of the summer, and also very popular among the rural population in Turkey. It was reported that, known also as the feast of *Hızır*, this feast was in Istanbul, also “a feast-day for butchers, when they were given permission to begin the slaughter of lambs”<sup>(26)</sup>. It is celebrated on May 6<sup>th</sup>, forty days after *Nevruz*. The word *Hidrellez* is formed by the succession of two words, *Hıdır* and *Ilyas*. *Hıdır*, *İdris*, *Hızır* and *Ilyas* are in Turkish the different names of the same legendary and blurred prophetic images mixed up and gathered in the person of Prophet *Elijah* with his disciple *Elisha*, implying their common attributes, feats and connotations. Originally, *İdris* is probably *Enoch*<sup>(15)</sup>, considered as an equivocal sacred figure involved in the creation or procreation process of *Adam*. He is represented in Islamic literature as a man of wisdom and science. According to *Sufi* beliefs, each epoch has its savior, *Hızır*, who commands the air, seas and climates. Many legendary qualities are attributed to this same personage. Among them the Koranic belief that *Hızır*, equated with *Elijah*, showed Moses the way, and for this reason his name became *Ilyas*. It is also said that Moses met a man superior to him, a man to whom God by His mercy taught science and knowledge, and that this man *Ilyas*, was resurrected after he had remained many long years in a cavern after the End of Days. It is added that *Ilyas*, revitalized after having immersed himself in the waters of life, took the name *Hızır*, meaning “green”<sup>(16)</sup>, in mark of renewal and rebirth.

## **THE OTTOMAN-JEWISH FOLK PATTERNS**

Two folk patterns reported by Galante, which existed among the Jews of Izmir, the native city of Sabbetai Sevi are of interest. The first is the belief and popular custom concerning the spring equinox known as *la dulce*. The second is the belief and behavior associated with the celebration of the banquet during *Purim* festivities.

### **La Dulse**

According to Galante, people believed that angels who guard the waters in the world are removed up at a precise moment during *tekufoth*. It was also believed that during this interval – known as *la Dulse* - when waters are without guardians, the devil poisons them. People should therefore take the necessary precautions in order not to be harmed by drinking water during the night at this moment. Announcing the imminent hours of danger, criers used to run and shout in the Jewish quarters to warn people



to observe this prohibition. Later, this was replaced by distributing notes to shops on which the perilous hours were indicated.<sup>(17)</sup>

*La Dulse* means, “jam” in Judeo-Spanish. Used as an adjective, *dulse* means “sweet”. Because even since the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *Nevruz* has been traditionally celebrated with great pomp in Manisa, a neighboring town of Izmir where a notable Jewish community existed, by distributing a sweet paste, known as Mesir Paste (of Manisa), *mesir* meaning, “feast” in Turkish<sup>(18)</sup>. The use of the term *la dulse*, indicating the perilous moment at *tekufoth* during spring equinox, is unique to the Jews of Izmir – also, possibly to its neighboring Jewish communities – and the sole apparent reason for using it is because of this sweet paste.

### **Purim Celebration**

Galante reports another peculiarity concerning the celebration of Purim among the Jews of Izmir. In conformity with *halachic* rules of Jewish orthodoxy, meat may be eaten after milk or dairy foods. However the opposite order is prohibited. During the banquet of *Purim*, inspired by the belief that *Purim* ought to be a time for intoxicating joy and that no sins are forbidden on Purim, the Jews of Izmir used to disregard this orthodox ruling.

Also instead of saying in Hebrew, “*Baruch Mordechai, Arur Haman*” (Blessed be Mordechai, Cursed be Haman) they used to utter the opposite, blessing the person who was the enemy of the Jewish people and cursing the one who was its saviour.<sup>(19)</sup>

### **THE COMMON CONCEPTUAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONTEXT**

The two popular festivities, *Nevruz* and *Hidrellez* are the relics of mythic beliefs and pagan traditions. It is reported that the Turkic peoples living in the former Ottoman empire and in Modern Turkey used to celebrate in their lands of origin in Asia, similar festivities related to the renewal of nature<sup>(20)</sup>. Accordingly, it would be probable that after settling in countries under Persian cultural influence or passing through them on their way to Asia Minor and other Ottoman lands, this tradition was combined with the *Nevruz* festival. On the other hand, there is also a strong Persian mystical influence on the population of Asia Minor and many of the peripheral countries.

Ottoman mysticism developed strongly within Turkic groups among the inhabitants of Anatolia, who still retain pre-Islamic pagan beliefs and

traditions. They were particularly receptive to the Shiite Persian theology that was also recognized as a liberal movement and more easily observed than Islamic Sunnite Orthodoxy. Thus, various streams of mystical belief grew up in the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, each with its own distinguishing activities, but similar in their concepts and ideology. Many popular uprisings found in this ideology a source of spiritual inspiration, engendering a range of social and political upheavals. The institutionalization of Ottoman mysticism led to the rise of the *Bektashi* and *Mevlevi* Sufi heterodoxies, integrating syncretistic and antinomian rituals and tenets including messianic beliefs. The *Bektashi* order recruited many members among the Janissary military corps - which was formed of boys taken from Christian families- because of its syncretistic affinities, which included certain vestiges of Christianity. Besides the reinforcement of the political standing of its institutions favored by this alliance, the Ottoman mystical lore found expression in a proficient and lyric literary creativity at all social levels leading to its widespread popularity.

Another principal reason for the development of such mystical movements was the multiple ethnicities of the Anatolian people and their multi-cultural and multi-religious texture. The open-minded, liberal and flexible tenets of mystical beliefs promoted confidence and communication between the Muslim and the non-Muslim populations.

Ottoman policy in its early period was oriented towards the integration under Ottoman rule of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish peoples living in Anatolia. An example of this may be found in the names chosen for three of Sultan Bayezid I children: *Mehmet*, *Isa* and *Musa*, the Turkish names for *Mahomet*, *Jesus* and *Moses*. Another example of this unifying conception can be found in the armed and massive popular uprising against Ottoman rule led by the Sufi leader Sheikh Bedrettin known as the son of the *Kadi* of Simavna, between 1416-1420 during a period of disruption for the Ottoman dynasty and the breakdown of central power, when the children of Sultan Bayezid fought among themselves to succeed him on the throne.

Bedrettin envisioned the establishment of an egalitarian community, directed by the people without any religious and ethnic discrimination. A Jew from Manisa, *Samuel*, known as *Torlak-hu Kemal*, organized and led the uprising in the region of Manisa. "*Torlak*" meaning "novice" in Turkish is also the appellation for a proselyte in the *Bektashi* order. *Torlak-hu Kemal* meaning "the Proselyte Kemal" indicates his clear affiliation to a mystical order. His clan was recruited from among the

Shiite Turkic population and recognized as dervishes was called *Kemali*, after his name.<sup>(21)</sup>

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Sabbatean movement emerged, the Ottoman Empire was too far behind in the technical and economical progress of its European rivals. It was a period of political and social instability marked by long military campaigns, interior struggles and upheavals. The impact of some events also betrays the existence of an apocalyptic and messianic state of mind among the Ottoman people in this period. On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1621, the Golden Horn froze and 16 days later, on February 9<sup>th</sup>, so did the Bosphorus. This event, which took place one month after the execution of his brother by Sultan Osman II, was conceived as a celestial manifestation of ill omen. On May 21<sup>st</sup> of that same year a solar eclipse, occurred just on the day when Osman II began his military campaign against Poland. The day of the solar eclipse also fell on the last day of the month according to the *Hegirah* calendar. These were considered as days of bad luck, and the decision to start the military campaign on this same day caused popular disdain and bafflement.<sup>(22)</sup>

Another evidence of the social and spiritual confusion, which promoted the growing of messianic expectations among the Ottoman people, was the eruption during this period of insurrections spearheaded by mystical credence and by aspirations of social deliverance. In 1638, royal forces quashed a popular insurgence led by the Sufi Sheikh *Ahmet* known as being from Sakarya. Considering himself the reincarnation of Jesus, he called himself *Isa Ruhullah* – meaning “Jesus soul of God”.<sup>(22)</sup> Another similar event was the appearance of the Kurdish Sheikh *Abdullah* who intended to proclaim his son as the *Mechdi*<sup>(23)</sup>. *Abdullah* also underwent a ceremony of grace and reconciliation similar to that of Sabbetai Sevi who was brought before the Ottoman Sultan later in the same year<sup>(24)</sup>.

Likewise, the report by the Swedish diplomat, Claes Rolamb, who visited the capital Istanbul in 1657, claims our attention. Rolamb reports that the Ottoman people, fearing the possibility of an armed attack by united Christian forces, believed in the appearance of a northern blond nation that would defeat them and put an end to their state. Rolamb adds that this race was named *Kavm-i Esfer*, which, because its phonetic resemblance referred to Sweden<sup>(25)</sup>. The Orthodox Patriarch of Istanbul, Parthenius III, in a letter to the Prince of Wallachia wrote that the era of Islam was approaching its end, and that soon “*the lords of the cross and the bells will be the lords of the empire*”. He was executed in that same year, 1657<sup>(26)</sup>, also sharing the fate of one of his predecessors, Cyril Lucaris, executed in 1638. Also, Rycault reported that later, in the same period, Istanbul feared that a Christian army was about to appear outside

the walls causing a collapse in housing prices, and many fled with their belongings to Asia<sup>(26)</sup>.

Besides this, the social and spiritual status of the Ottoman Jewry in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in its aftermaths also warrants attention. The general deterioration also affected its Jewish community which began losing its political, social and economic power and descending into cultural and spiritual crisis. The influx of Iberian immigrants to Ottoman lands having almost ceased, Ottoman Jews had already lost their superior position as international traders. Their links with the cultural lore of European Jewry was also interrupted and affected, leading them to search for new sources of spiritual inspiration.

In this context, some events are worth exploring. The first of them is the execution by the authorities in Istanbul of Rabbi Yehudah Covo in 1637. Rabbi Covo came to the Capital at the head of a delegation representing the Jewish community of Salonica in order to deliver cloth for army uniforms – a special tax that was levied from the Jews of Salonica. Covo was hanged on the gallows for allegedly furnishing low quality cloth. Before the execution members of the delegation were arrested and on the Shabbat day were marched with shackles on their hands and feet through the streets of the city.<sup>(27)</sup> There is no doubt that the execution of a rabbi responsible for his community's interests was an unheard of and devastating event for Turkish Jewry. The deep feeling of intimidation and disappointment provoked by Covo's execution has probably continued to live in the collective memory of succeeding generations.

Other relevant events that occurred at that time were fires that broke out in Istanbul and other cities such as Edirne and Salonica. The years in which great fires that massively ravaged the habitations in the Jewish quarters and Jewish workshops in Istanbul in the 17<sup>th</sup> century are reported as 1606, 1618, 1633, 1660, 1663<sup>(28)</sup>. Joseph Sambarry describes the fire of the year 1660 in these terms: *“The fire ran along the ground and burnt houses, yards, fields, synagogues and centers of Torah study... This fire was a disaster not only for the Jews but also for all the inhabitants of the capital city. The Turkish writers themselves have testified that such a catastrophe had never occurred before in Constantinople... As a result of the fire, a great change was brought about for the Jews of Constantinople. The Turkish residents of that area, who had also suffered much damage from the fire that spread from the Jewish streets into all parts of the neighborhood, blamed the Jews and would not allow them to rebuild their burnt homes and synagogues... The ancient communities in the capital city completely disappeared and were never revived... All the*

*hidden treasures of Jewish wisdom that the Spanish exiles had brought with them and which they managed to acquire in their new homeland were badly destroyed. The end also came for the Romanioth (Byzantine Jewish) community, which had resisted with all its strength against losing their independence and assimilating with the Spanish Jews. From that time onward their identity were obliterated by the “Sephardim” ... ”<sup>(29)</sup>*

The Jewish communities of Salonica in 1610 and 1620, and Edirne in 1701 were also the prey of great fires, with similar consequences for their Jewish communities.<sup>(30)</sup> In the year 1631, on the day that a famous rabbi died, dust and ashes – probably coming from the eruption of the Vesuvius - rained down on Salonica filling the hearts of the rabble with horror as they collected handfuls of it. Everyone saw it as the expression of divine anger and preserved it in their homes as a precious memento for a miraculous event<sup>(30)</sup>.

Whatever their real reasons, the popular uprisings against the central authority were ideologically and traditionally spearheaded by reformist allegations combined with messianic expectations. They were principally fomented in the Shiite populations within of the Ottoman Empire, known as *Kızılbaş* and *Alevi* and akin to the *Bektashi* and *Mevlevi* heterodoxies. When Sabbetai Sevi proclaimed himself the Messiah, he also aroused an interest bordering upon excitement among the non-Jewish population<sup>(31)</sup>.

According to rumors, during the secret rites observed by Shiite populations, which are accompanied by music and drinking, the candles would go out at a certain point and the entire ceremony would turn into an orgy. This festivity is popularly known in Turkish as *mum söndü alemi*, meaning “festivity of extinguishing candles”. Rumors about this custom spread in Turkey and are even extant today. The unique terms in the Turkish language to denote one who commits incest are *kızılbaş* and *alevi*.<sup>(31)</sup>

After his conversion, Sabbetai Sevi met and became friendly with a leader of the *Bektashi* order by the name of Mehmet Niyazi. He was a guest at his house of worship and participated in *Bektashi* rituals in Istanbul and perhaps in Edirne as well. Erotic and mystic aspects in testimonies relating the circumstances of Sabbetai Sevi’s second arrest by officials also draw attention. It was reported that Sevi was seen surrounded by a group of men and women followers singing psalms and preparing themselves for a drinking orgy. It is also known that in the earliest annals of Sabbateanism, the movement adopted the liturgy of

*dervishes* in the Turkish language transliterated into Hebrew characters.<sup>(32)</sup>

## **RETROSPECT and CONCLUSIONS**

The Sabbatean integration of celebrating spring festival as a Sabbatean feast has been explored in the context of particular factors central to the Sabbatean community and to Ottoman mystical groups, correlated between them, and extended to other spheres.

The period when the Sabbatean movement arose and flourished was marked by political, social and spiritual uncertainty for the Ottoman people in general and its Jewish community in particular. Fear of some immanent disaster with the expectation of a divine saviour was continually stirring on both sides, and this brought a sense of their common fate, which gradually drew them spiritually closer.

There are many common spiritual and behavioral characteristics shared by the Sabbatean community and Ottoman mystical groups<sup>(31)</sup>. The Sabbateans probably found in the tolerant and even receptive attitude of the Ottoman public opinion towards mystical heterodoxies, a legitimate foundation for their tenets. The analogy between their syncretistic, antinomian and secretive mystical lore also seems to have played a cardinal role in establishing a rapprochement and a close relationship between them.<sup>(33)</sup>

The association of the combined image of *Elijah* and *Elisha* to *Hidirellez*, also in the context of linking biblical events seen as mythical legends with those of the Ottoman spring festival, *Nevruz*, appears to be worth consideration. Another Sabbatean feast called “His (Sevi) Anointing (as the Messiah) by *Elijah*” falling on *Sivan 21*<sup>(1)</sup>, testifies to the importance accorded to the mythic significance of the Prophet in the Sabbatean lore, reflected in a similar conceptual attitude towards his Ottoman counterpart, *Ilyas*. A Sabbatean text of homilies, associating chaos and promiscuity with the creation of universe and the messianic advent, comments that the biblical report of Elisha’s visit to the woman from Shunem in a cavern is treated as a paradigm of ritual fornication.<sup>(34)</sup> The Sabbatean community seems also having kept the tradition of holding a secretive celebration during the night in a cavern in a forest, in Istanbul<sup>(35)</sup>. Many other biblical themes confirming the ambivalent value of sacrilege and holiness of sexual behavior probably constituted a source of inducement for the sexual conduct during the “*Lamb Festival*”.

However, their links with the messianic advent and ideology may be in themselves the subject of an independent study.

There is no doubt that the renewal of nature represented by the Sabbatean Spring Festival also implied themes associated with the creation of the world and man, as well as the reappearance of the Messiah, according to one belief, as the original *Adam*. The extinguishing of lights and the concomitant sexual orgy is a simulacrum of the darkness, the eschatological, messianic and creational chaos and the free expression of instinctual needs followed by the rebirth, as it is conceived in mystical philosophies.

The 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month *Adar* is notified as the birthday and the 28<sup>th</sup> day as the day of the circumcision of Sevi in the list of Sabbatean feasts list<sup>(1, 2)</sup>. The Jewish tradition ordering circumcision one week after birth, the linking of “*Sabbatean Lamb Festival*” to the rebirth of Sabbetai Sevi, as it is mentioned seems understandable. It may also be explained as conforming with the advent of the Messiah on this day and sheds light on the reported<sup>(2)</sup> controversy over the date of 9 of *Ab*, which is accepted as his birthday.

A significant event closely associated with the subject of this work is also the revelation of divine faith to Sabbetai Sevi during *Passover*. Scholem writes:

*“About a year and a half after the apostasy there was renewed commotion in Adrianople around the person of Sabbatai Sevi, this time in connection with a ‘great illumination’ that had come upon him during the Passover festival of 1668...”* Scholem adds that apparently two tracts were written on this occasion in the spring or summer of 1668 and continues that in 1915 Rosanes reports that he saw in Salonica a manuscript which begins as follows:

*“Know ye that in the year 1668, as our Lord AMIRAH was at his table celebrating the ritual of the Passover night, there appeared to him twenty-four thousand angels, all saying: Thou art our Lord, thou art our King, thou art our Redeemer.”*<sup>(36)</sup>

The eating of the lamb during this festivity, besides the Ottoman custom of the beginning of slaughtering lambs in *Hidirellez*, also may have its origins in the Jewish tradition of the paschal lamb sacrifice at Passover. It seems also that it replaced the Jewish Passover possibly due also to the revelation of the divine faith to Sabbetai Sevi on this day. Also, the “*Lamb Festival*” is analogous to Passover, symbolizing the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery. Moreover, Passover represented in

Sabbatean lore, the era when the Messiah would appear. Concrete evidence of this assumption is a tray that I inspected and which was probably used - as were other such trays - at this festivity. The tray reminds one of the Passover tray and depicts clear allegorical figures and symbols associated with the creation of the world and the messianic advent.<sup>(37)</sup>

On the other hand, the feast of *Purim*, which also falls in spring, similarly represents the salvation of the Jewish people. The manner in which it was celebrated with great joy, free-expression of emotions and antinomian behavior by Ottoman Jews is probably a vestige of ancient renewal festivals, which were probably integrated within the “*Sabbatean Lamb Festival*”. Evidence of this is the report that as late as the seventeenth century a festival called *Purim* was introduced among the Sabbateans at beginning of spring, which reached its climax in the extinguishing of lights and in an orgiastic exchange of wives.<sup>(38)</sup>

Two peculiar features associated with Ottoman Jewry’s folk tradition appear to have played a central role establishing the “*Sabbatean Lamb Festival*”. The first is the superstitious belief about the evil spirits related to spring equinox, based on the traditional concept of *tekufoth*. The belief of the danger of drinking water during this period – and, precisely during the climatic moment of the Lamb Festival at midnight - known as *la dulce*, indicates the awareness of the subject and of the possibility of its introduction into Sabbatean liturgy. The conversion of demonic danger into a phenomenon of salvation is one of the basic tenets of Sabbatean mystical thought: “*the dissolution of the devil and its revelation as the divine truth*”. The second is the antinomian behavior manifested by Jews of Izmir during the celebration of *Purim* festivity, which compares with the climactic cathartic-emotional experience conceived to antecede renewal and salvation as it was expressed during Lamb Festival and seems to be a prototype of it.

Moreover, the “*Sabbatean Lamb Festival*” appears to have its roots in a composite and multidimensional context. This festival stems from an archaic and mythical amalgam of pagan beliefs and rites combined with the Jewish and Ottoman common mystical and social heritage. It seems that its constituents, in their compounded and expanded forms, were introduced during the process of the canonization of this festival as a Sabbatean holiday. Probably, during this process, many of these constituents existed only in their symbolic, intuitive and subliminal forms of expressions in the collective memory, without a full awareness of each one of them.



In my opinion it is the complexity of this legacy in its own entirety, which marks the peculiar and even unique heretical nature of the “Sabbatean Lamb Festival”.

#### EPILOGUE

*It happened in the second half of the forties in the past century when I was a child. It was decided that on a particular night we – the children - should organize a festive reunion in the cellar of the building in which we lived. I know it was spring for the simple reason that the she-goat of our neighbor had given birth and its milk was to be distributed during the reunion. Possibly also, because the weather in Istanbul was warm enough to afford a reunion in the humid and dark cellar.*

*After having entertained ourselves with the traditional Turkish shadow play, known as “Hacivat and Karagöz” and drunken goat milk, the time came to go home. At this precise moment the organizer of the reunion – the oldest among us- addressed the Sabbatean children: “You are not allowed to go home until the adults finish their meeting, are you?” The children agreed without saying a word, expressing themselves only by nodding.*

*In spite of its ambiguous and unexpected character, I had the intuition that a certain truth lay beyond this question and that it ought to be tacitly respected... On the other hand, the relations among us were so warm and so beautiful, what importance could it have?*

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- (1) The “Lamb Festival” was probably first reported by Abraham Danon, after noticing its date as 21 *Adar*. Other Sabbatean feasts are also reported. See M. (Abraham) Danon, “Une Secte Judéo- Musulmane en Turquie” in *Actes du Onzième Congrès International des Orientalistes* (Paris 1897), Troisième Section, Langues et Archéologie Musulmanes, ed. Ernest Leroux , Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, M DCCC, XCIX, pp. 65-6.
- (2) This feast is also known in Turkish as “*dört gönül bayramı*”, which means “the feast of four hearts”. Avram Galante, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, (Istanbul: Isis, 1989?), VIII, p. 217.
- (3) Linwood Fredericksen, “Feast and Festival” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, (1973), 7, pp. 197-202.
- (4) The legends of *Marduk* and *Tiamat*, *Astarte* and *Adonis*, *Tammuz* and *Ishtar* and of *Attis* and *Cybele*, refer historically to this kind of relationship, and are bound by the same geographical and cultural links. Many other examples may be added to them, but a larger and more detailed study of them extends beyond the limits of this study. For more details, see *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*,

- introd. Robert Graves, (London: Hamlyn, 1959).
- (5) Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, "Saisons Judaïsme" in *Dictionnaire Critique de l'Esotérisme*, ed. Jean Servier, (Paris: PUF, 1988), pp. 1155-6.
  - (6) Angelo S. Rappaport, *The Folklore of the Jews* (London: Soncino Press, 1937), pp. 110-4.
  - (7) Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition, A Study in Folk Religion*, (New York: Behrman House, 1937), pp. 257-9.  
Jephtah the Gileadite was one of the many tribal leaders or "judges" of Israel who defended his people from their warring enemies. Before going into the battle, he made a vow that if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice the first thing he saw when he returned home. He won the battle and on his way home his daughter and only child came out to meet him with songs and dances to celebrate his victory. He told her of his vow and she asked him to give her two months to mourn her fate. Finally, as the Bible says, Jephtah "did with her according to his vow... and she knew no man" (*Judges* 11:39).
  - (8) Avigdor Aptowitzer, "Isur Shtiath Mayim beSha'ath haTekufah" [Prohibition Against Drinking Water During the Period of Seasonal Change] in *HaTzofeh*, (Budapest, 1912), II, pp. 122-6; Levi Ginzberg, "Arba Tekufoth" [Four Seasons] in *HaTzofeh* (Budapest, 1913), III, pp. 184-6.
  - (9) A female and nocturnal demon in Jewish mythology. She symbolizes sexual lust and is said to have seduced Adam and borne demons and evil spirits.
  - (10) Quoted by Trachtenberg, *op. cit.* p. 313.
  - (11) Arthur Spier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar, Its Structure, History, and One Hundred Years of Corresponding Dates, 5660-5760, 1900-2000*, (New York: Behrman House, 1952), p. 224.
  - (12) Isaac de Mattatias Aboab, *Seder Berakhot – Orden de las Bendiciones* (Hebrew with Portuguese), trans. by Binyanin Senior (Amsterdam: Albert Magnus, 1686/7).
  - (13) Moïse Schuhl, *Superstitions et Coutumes Populaires du Judaïsme Contemporain* (Paris: L. Blum, 1882), pp. 32-3.
  - (14) M. Abdulhalûk Çay, *Türk Ergenekon Bayramı, Nevruz* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1988), pp. 22-3.
  - (15) Koran, surah 21:85, quoted by Cyril Glassé in "Idris" in *The Concise Encyclopædia of Islam* (London: Stacey International, 1991), p. 180.
  - (16) Koran, surah 18: 64-82, quoted by Burhan Oğuz in *Türk ve Yahudi Kültürlerine bir Mukayeseli Bakış*, (Istanbul: Yazır Matbaası, 1992), I, pp. 156, 470-1.
  - (17) Galante, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 211-2.
  - (18) Originally given out for its medicinal value, the distribution of the Mesir Paste later became a well-rooted tradition. The Mesir Celebration began to be held in around 1539 and since then, every year on March 21st, the day of the *Nevruz* festival, the people gather in front of the Sultan Mosque to catch the Mesir Paste wrapped in paper as it is tossed out to them.
  - (19) Galante, *op. cit.*, III, p. 166.  
The festival of Purim is celebrated in the month of *Adar* to commemorate the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people living in the Persian Empire during the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE from the threat of total annihilation. The evil fate plotted by the Grand Vizier *Haman* was overturned by the intervention of *Mordechai* and *Esther*. The full story is told in the biblical *Book of Esther*.
  - (20) Çay, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

- (21) Oğuz, *op. cit.*, II, p. 836.
- (22) Yılmaz Öztuna, *Büyük Türkiye Tarihi*, (Istanbul: Ötüken Yayınevi, 1977), V, pp. 156-7, 159, 186, 269.
- (23) According to Islamic beliefs, the appellation of a figure which will appear before the Day of Judgment.
- (24) Galante, *op. cit.*, VIII, pp. 179-80.
- (25) Metin Kunt, in *Türkiye Tarihi*, ed. Sinan Akşin, (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi 1988), III, p. 36. *Kavm-i Esfer* may also be understood as *Kavm-i Esfar*, which means “Nation of Military Campaigns”.
- (26) Anthony Greenwood, *Istanbul's Meat Provisioning: A Study of the Celepjan System*, (Chicago: 1981), unpublished Ph.D. thesis; Suraiya Faroqhi, *Towns and Townsmen of Ottoman Anatolia*, (Cambridge: 1984); M. de Thévenot, *Travels into the Levant*, (1687) 3 parts ; J. de Hammer, *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman*, (1835-40), XII, p. 17; Macarius, Patriarch of Antioch, (1936), *Travels*, 3, p. 85. Quoted by Philip Mansel in *Constantinople, City of the World's Desire, 1453-1924*, (Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 143, 51, 119.
- (27) Joseph Nehama, “Le Drame des Impôts” in *Histoire des Israélites de Salonique*, ed. O. Camhy, (Salonique: Fédération Sépharadite Mondiale, 1959), V, pp. 71-90.
- (28) Salomon A. Rosanes, *Koroth ha Yehudim beTurkia ve beArtzoth haKedem, 1640-1730* [History of the Jews in Turkey and Eastern Lands, 1640-1730], (Sofia: Amichpat, 1934-1935), IV, pp. 11-12. See also Galante, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 143-4; Öztuna, *op. cit.*, V, pp. 229-30.
- (29) Rosanes, *op. cit.*
- (30) Nehama, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 75-6. See also Öztuna, *op. cit.*, XII, pp. 276-7.
- (31) Nassi, Gad, “Shabbetaism and the Ottoman Mystical Tradition” in *500 Years in our Heritage, 1492-1992, First International Congress on Turkish Jewry* organized by MORIT, Beth Hatefusoth. Tel-Aviv, October 1989. Turkish version of the same paper, “Sabetaycılık ve Osmanlı Mistik Geleneği”, *Tarih ve Toplum*, XVI, 75, (Istanbul, March 1990) pp. 143-145.
- (32) Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, (Schocken, 1984), p. 161.
- (33) Nassi, *op. cit.*
- (34) See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea...* p. 163.  
 Elisha was appointed by Elijah to succeed him as the leading prophet of Israel. In the town of Shunem he met a pious and wealthy woman who invited him to eat at her home whenever he passed, and later she suggested to her husband that they build him a little chamber on the wall where he could rest on his journey. The woman, married to an old man, had no child, and to compensate her for her kindness, Elisha blessed her, saying that within a year she would bear a son. The boy grew up and one day he went out to the fields with his father for the wheat harvesting. He suffered a sudden sunstroke and was taken home to his mother. After a few hours he died, and she laid his body on the bed of the prophet. She then traveled to the town where the prophet was staying and told him what happened. He then returned with her and stretched himself on the body of the boy and prayed God to revive him. The boy sneezed seven times and was restored to life. (II Kings, 4: 8ff)
- (35) Personal communication by Mordechai Arbell, who was the Israeli Consul in Istanbul between the years 1956-1960.
- (36) Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah*, Bollingen Series

XCIII (Princeton, 1989), pp. 828-832.

(37) Nassi, Gad, "Tres Objetos Sabetayistos", *Aki Yerushalayim*, XXI, 63, (Jerusalem, May 2000), pp. 7-13. The English version of the same article, appears separately in this book.

(38) See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea...* p. 75.

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