

## PRE-MESSIANIC COGNITIVE DISSONANCE HAREUVENI IN LISBON

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### Abstract

More than a few studies in social psychology dealt with what I call Post-Messianic Cognitive Dissonance, namely the dissonance arising in the wake of a failed messianic vision. In this paper I consider the other side of the equation, what I call Pre-Messianic Cognitive Dissonance, that is not the dissonance that arises from messianism but the dissonance that gives rise to messianism. I examine in detail one historical case of messianism, the case of the Sixteenth Century's David HaReuveni (or Reubeni). I focus on the critical state of cognitive dissonance experienced by the Jews of Europe in general and of Lisbon in particular at the start of that century. I analyze the major causes of this state and I explain from a social-psychological perspective how it gave rise to a wide ranging scope of belief in HaReuveni's vision. Finally I note that similar circumstances surround other Jewish false Messiahs, chief among them the Seventeenth Century's Shabtai Zvi.

**Keywords:** *Cognitive dissonance, pre-messianic, post-messianic, David HaReuveni.*

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### 1. Introduction – when prophecy fails

Leon Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance was born practically hand in hand with the study of an apocalyptic-messianic group that predicted the destruction of the world and believed that its members will be saved by what they called Guardians from outer space. This study, by Festinger and two colleagues, was chronicled in a book entitled *When Prophecy Fails*, published in 1956, one year before the 1957's publication of the ground breaking *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. The in-depth analysis in the failed prophecy book of the resulting cognitive dissonance drew appraisal and criticism in numerous books and articles in social psychology and related areas. Comparisons were drawn with other cases of messianism (See e.g., Bader (1999), Dein (2001) and several articles in Lewis' *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions* (2003).)

Members of the group studied by Festinger and his colleagues made preparations to be carried out of Planet Earth in flying saucers just before midnight of December 21, 1954, when a great flood will engulf all living creatures. Five collaborators of Festinger, pretending to be believers, closely observed the group's behavior before and after the prophecy's failure. Their findings led to the conclusion that disconfirmation of a prophecy may sometimes strengthen the initial belief and yield, among other things, increased proselytizing.

Critics of Festinger's approach, among them Melton (1985), argued that in the believers' eyes there is fact no failure of the prophecy. Their interpretation of reality is markedly different from that of outsiders. This view is depicted in a book entitled *When Prophecy Never Fails* by Tumminia (2005), analyzing what she calls "Myth and Reality in a Flying-Saucer Group".

Alongside appraisal and criticism of *When Prophecy Fails* and of Cognitive Dissonance Theory itself, the theory underwent extensions and modifications, yet remained alive and kicking as witness e.g. Harmon-Jones & Mills' (1999) collection of 13 new articles and the recent resort to cognitive dissonance tenets in relation to Covid19 (See, for instance, Aronson and Tavris (2020)).

Common to the study of *When Prophecy Fails* and the comparative studies mentioned above and others along the same line is that they deal with the dissonance arising after the collapse of the prophecy or the messianic mission. I call this Post-Messianic Cognitive Dissonance. In this paper I consider the other side of the equation, what I call Pre-Messianic Cognitive Dissonance, namely not the dissonance that arises from messianism but the dissonance that gives rise to messianism. I examine in detail one historical case of messianism and then I briefly discuss similar considerations relating to other cases. I chose to concentrate here on the case of David HaReuveni (or Reubeni) for two reasons. First, we're in

Lisbon, where the major part of HaReuveni's story took place. Second, next year, 2024, is the five hundredth year, half millennium, since the appearance of HaReuveni with his messianic message.

## 2. The story of David HaReuveni

HaReuveni's European saga starts in February 1524, when out of nowhere he emerged in Venice with a fantastic sounding tale. He claimed that he is a messenger from a faraway land called Habor, presumably somewhere in Arabia or Africa. His name, he said, is David and his late father, Solomon, was king of Habor. Recall that in the Bible (Samuel and Kings books) these are the names of the two powerful kings (albeit in a reversed order – David is Solomon's father) of a united Israelite kingdom. At the moment, he related, the reigning king of that land is his brother, Joseph. And recall that in the book of Genesis, Joseph was a Hebrew slave who turned into ruler of Egypt, second to Pharaoh.

The obviously purposeful resort to meaningful biblical names went on with the mysterious messenger's reference to the inhabitants of Habor. He proclaimed that they are descendants of two and a half of the ten lost tribes of Israel – the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh. These tribes, according to 1 Chronicles 5:26, were deported by the Assyrians to Habor among other unidentified places. But long beforehand they are the tribes that, as we read in the book of Numbers, were allowed by Moses to settle on the eastern side of the River Jordan in return for promising to go up in arms ahead of all other tribes in the battle to conquer the land on the western side. Thus, their names convey an image of fierce, highly motivated, fighters.

Indeed, his brother, King Joseph, David maintained, has under his command an army of 300,000 Jewish fighters ready to go to war to redeem the Holy Land, that same land west of River Jordan, from Ottoman rule. And it's the fact, according to his story, that some of them are descendants of the tribe of Reuben, the patriarch Jacob's first-born, that endowed David with the title HaReuveni (Hebrew for 'Of Reuben'). He himself, while claiming that he represents the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, claimed also that he is a descendant of King David. This meant that he is of the tribe of Judah, yet no one seemed to care much about this contradiction.

The message HaReuveni 'brought' from Habor was that his brother, King Joseph, was seeking to form a Jewish-Christian alliance against the Moslems ruling the Holy Land. He wants his Habor army to be joint by armies from European countries, or at least to be equipped by cannons and other weapons, for the battle that will liberate Christian holy sites and enable Jews to return to their ancient homeland and rebuild their lost temple.

In Venice HaReuveni met local Jewish leaders and found his way to Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo who sent him to Rome to meet Pope Clemens VII. The pope went on to dispatch him with a letter of recommendation to King João III of Portugal. The king met HaReuveni and agreed to supply him with the cannons he requested. It was thought to be in the best interest of Portugal and other European countries to assist an army preparing for war against the Ottoman Empire which at that time posed imminent threat to Christian Europe.

The fact that HaReuveni, an openly declared Jew, was received and honored like a prince by the pope in Rome and the king in Lisbon stirred up waves of excitement among Jews and Marranos (Jews who converted or were forced to convert to Christianity, also called Conversos or New Christians). To many of them the idea that somewhere in the world there is a Jewish army ready to take over their land of dreams was nothing less than messianic vision. Joy and hope rose high and a process of openly or secretly returning to Judaism started accelerating. This was too much for the king, and a mere few months after welcoming HaReuveni to his palace he ordered him to leave Portugal.

Most notable of Lisbon's Marranos who openly returned to Judaism under the influence of HaReuveni was a man called Diego Pires who held the post of secretary to the High Court of Appeals. He circumcised himself and changed his name to Shlomo Molcho – presumably Portuguese sounding version of the Hebrew name Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon). Molcho left Portugal and moved to Italy, where he studied Talmud and Kabbala and pretty soon achieved reputation with sermons concerning Messianic kingdom in the very near future.

HaReuveni at first dissociated himself from Molcho, but around 1530 he joined him in Italy and in 1532 they went together to Ratisbon to meet Emperor Charles V. The meeting may have started well but ended catastrophically. The emperor took them back to Italy where Molcho was sentenced to death by fire in an *auto-da-fé*. HaReuveni was sent to prison in Spain where he died (perhaps executed) sometime between 1538 and 1541.

There is rich bibliography concerning HaReuveni in Hebrew and other languages. A good, concise, English source is Benmelech (2011).

### 3. Pre-Messianic dissonance

HaReuveni's story is shrouded in mysteries and questions. Who was he? Where did he come from? (Scholars' suggestions range from Russia, Poland and Spain, through Egypt, Arabia and Yemen to India and Afghanistan.) What made him cook the Habor story? What was he hoping to achieve? Did he truly believe he'd get the weaponry he requested? And if so, what would he have done with it?

Yet the most compelling query relates not to HaReuveni himself but to the impact of his vision. How is it that so many Jews and Marranos accepted his fantastic tale and saw it as Messianic tidings?

The answer has partly to do with the fact that more than a few Christians, among them leading figures such as the pope and the Portuguese king, also didn't right away rule out the possibility that maybe there is some truth in HaReuveni's story. They had vested interest in examining every idea, unlikely as it may be, concerning war against the Ottomans. And this was a period when new lands were discovered by European seamen all round the world, and a legendary Christian kingdom, Prester John's kingdom, was believed by many to be hidden somewhere among pagan lands (Silverberg, 1972). So, the notion of a hidden Jewish land didn't necessarily sound utterly farfetched.

But the main factor behind the wide spreading faith in HaReuveni among Jews and Marranos was cognitive dissonance. Just three decades before HaReuveni's appearance world Jewry suffered the most devastating blow since the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem a millennium and a half earlier. This was the expulsion from Spain in 1492. In the two or three centuries prior to the expulsion Spanish Jews, despite forced conversion of many of them to Christianity and other hardships inflicted on them by the church and the inquisition, experienced an age of prosperity and flourishing culture. They saw Spain as a place where they can live and thrive for generations. Expulsion was one thing they couldn't envisage, and when it hit them the dissonance between expectations and reality was unbearable.

The deportation from Spain wasn't the end of the saga. The deportees scattered all round Europe and North Africa, but most of them (about two thirds, between 80,000 and 120,000 according to various estimates, e.g. in Roth, 1932) sought refuge in neighboring Portugal. In December 1496 King Manuel I, at the request of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel of Spain whose daughter he wanted to marry, ordered deportation of all Jews of Portugal. His intention was in fact to force them to choose between conversion and expulsion. While most of them chose to convert and stay in Portugal, more than a few preferred expulsion, or even death, to conversion.

In response to this kind of resistance the king decreed that the Jews are his slaves and are denied the right to move freely from one place to another in the country. Then, in 1499 he also denied the right of Marranos to leave the country. Still both Jews and Marranos felt relatively safe in Portugal. They did well in work and trade and formed tight communities sustained by mutual help and charity. Needless to say, this led old Christians to view the new ones as unwanted aliens.

The disaster didn't take long to come. It's known as the Lisbon Massacre. In April 1506 several Marranos were arrested for secretly celebrating the Jewish Passover. Two days later they were released from jail and rumors (perhaps partly true) held that bribery played part in the affair. At the same time a New Christian was heard in church loudly mocking Christian miracles. All of this together was enough to incite the multitudes to action against Marranos. Mobs burst into houses killing Marranos and carrying their bodies to burn them at the city center. All in all, between 2000 and 4000 (again according to different estimates) Marranos were massacred in four days. Once again the dissonance of feelings of wellness and security as opposed to harsh reality was overwhelming.

In addition to the communal dissonance there was the personal dissonance of many, if not most of, the Marranos who secretly kept Jewish practice and tradition alongside Christian overt behavior. You are Jewish at home and Christian outwards. This entails a painful clash between two sets of conduct and an even more painful clash between two identities.

Communal and personal dissonance lingered on for decades to come in spite of the fact that in 1507 King Manuel lifted the restrictions he had imposed on New Christians in 1499. Discrimination and suspicion of Marranos went on unabashedly. Still in 1524, King Manuel's heir, João III, while renewing the 1507's alleviations also allotted spies to trace Marranos who are not fully committed to Christianity.

And then, just one year later, the same king extended princely welcome to the openly Jewish HaReuveni. Insinuating to the Bible through names such as Habor, David, Solomon, Joseph, Reuben, Gad, Manasseh, HaReuveni maintained that he is bringing a message from some of the ten lost tribes who according to Jewish legends are to reappear with the coming of the Messiah. Adopting this messianic message was the best strategy Jews and Marranos could employ to restore balance between two communal cognitions that came into dissonance (harsh reality vs. hopeful expectations) as well as between two conflicting self identities (Jewish vs. Christian). The dissonance was resolved. They could forge a feeling that soon enough, with an army of 300,000 fierce Jewish warriors on their side they'd be able to live freely as Jews, protected against their enemies and perhaps even return to their promised land

#### 4. Other messiahs

Shabtai Tzvi (Sabbatai Zevi), the most famous and most influential of all Jewish false Messiahs, was born in Smyrna (now Izmir in Turkey) in 1626 and declared himself Messiah in 1648. His fascinating story is recounted in Scholem (1937) and in numerous subsequent books. The staggering part of the story took place in the early 1660's with faith in Shabtai Tzvi spreading throughout Europe, from Holland and France in the west through Germany and Hungary to Poland and Russia in the east. Devout followers of the charismatic Messiah started selling their property and giving up their posts in preparation to return to their ancient homeland.

Finally, in 1666 Shabtai Tzvi made his way to Constantinople ostensibly with the intention to depose the Sultan as a pre-condition to fulfilling his holy mission. Upon arrival in Constantinople, he was arrested right away and after a few months moving from one jail to another was put to trial. During all that period most of his followers were still certain that he is the true Messiah. In the trial he was offered to choose between death sentence and conversion to Islam. He chose conversion.

Several pages are dedicated to Shabtai Tzvi and his legacy in the first chapter of *When Prophecy Fails*. Festinger and his colleagues are concerned with the believers' response to the Messianic vision's failure. Even after the total and most dramatic collapse of the redemption promise – the supposed savior's conversion to Islam, more than a few of his followers kept their faith in him and went on proselyting. They invented explanations to his conversion, claiming that it was a necessary stage in the messianic process. Some of them went as far as joining him into Islam and forming a sect called Dönme. Still today some Dönme groups in Turkey are holding that Shabtai Tzvi is the true Messiah. As might be expected, these are small groups, since to most of his followers Shabtai Tzvi's conversion marked end-game.

Festinger and his colleagues conclude that "The Sabbataian 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. But there does seem to be a point at which the disconfirming evidence has mounted sufficiently to cause the belief to be rejected".

From this account of post-messianic dissonance, we now turn to pre-messianic dissonance. We see it as a major factor in the arrival and rise of Shabtai Zvi.

As noted above, Shabtai Tzvi proclaimed himself Messiah in 1648. This was the year that, based on Kabbalistic and various other types of calculation, was expected by many Jews to be the year of their Messiah's revelation. Instead, this was precisely the start year of the most horrific catastrophe the befell world Jewry before the twentieth century's holocaust. Hundreds of Jewish communities were completely wiped out and tens of thousands men, women and children were killed in course of the Cossack rebellion against Polish rule of territories in parts of today's Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. The Cossack rebels, led by Bogdan Khmelnytsky, saw the Jews as collaborators, lessees and estate managers of the Polish landowners. Added to the age-old deep-seated hatred of Jews, this was good enough reason to show no mercy to them.

The best-known chronicle of what happened to the Jews in those dark days is *Yeven Metzulah*, a seventeenth-century Hebrew book by Nathan Hannover. It was translated into several languages, among them English under the title *Abyss of Despair*, first published by Transaction Publishers and by Bloch Publishing Company in 1950 and then by Routledge in 1983 and as a facsimile in 2018. Despite certain reservations concerning inaccuracies, this book is still considered fairly reliable as a historical source. Good recent sources are Glaser (2015) and Stampfer (2008).

No dissonance can be more painful than that between the messianic expectations towards 1648 and the events that actually took place that year. To Jews throughout Europe and beyond the dissonance was overwhelming. And Shabtai Tzvi's appearance was a rescue rope for them. Accepting him as their Messiah enabled them to restore balance between the two contradicting cognitions. They could see the disastrous Khmelnytsky's pogroms as what's called in Hebrew *Chevlei Mashiach* (Messiah's Hardships), namely apocalyptic hardships that must precede Messiah's days and pave the road for his coming.

Among stories of other failed messianic messages of special interest is that of Abner of Burgos (1270 or a little earlier – 1347 or a little later). In this case we encounter dissonance that is at the same time both post-messianic and pre-messianic – steering from Messiah to Messiah. I plan to elaborate on this story in a subsequent paper.

#### 5. Concluding remarks

Like Festinger I took the liberty (and the challenge) to employ contemporary conceptual tools in the study of past times' events. Unlike Festinger the focus of my attention with respect to those events was their pre-messianic rather than post-messianic features.

I acknowledge with gratitude reports of the reviewers of this paper's abstract. Their comments were of valuable help to me while writing the full article.

In some parts of this paper I delved into history. I thought it is important to dwell, for instance, on the message and the acts of HaReuveni and on the events preceding his appearance in Europe, so as to fully appreciate the dissonance that was there and the key he handed in to resolve it. I relied on several sources, some of them mentioned above and listed here below. Still, if there are any inaccuracies in the historical accounts as presented in this paper it is solely me responsibility.

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