

BOOK REVIEW

Yakov Z. Mayer, *Nehemiah* [*A Hebrew Novel*], (Yediot Sefarim, 2019), 335 pp.

Reviewed by
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The appearance of Sabbatai Sevi as “messiah” in the mid-seventeenth century touched on the mystery of Judaism and embraced some ever-present, hidden core embedded in the soul of the believer, which exists independent of the formal world of halakha, institutions, and the laws of non-mystical, rationalist Judaism. This explains mysticism’s power throughout the generations and how Sabbateanism touched on this in the deepest manner, playing as it did on the Jewish people’s most sensitive heart-string: the thirst for redemption.

In modern times, when Jewish spirituality has become a desired commodity and “redemption” has shifted focus from the nation to the individual as part of the spiritual wave sweeping Western culture as a whole, Jews are also looking for something different, deeper, and more existential. After the waning of the great ideals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and after the success of Zionism, it is felt that the time has come to place the individual at the center. This explains the growth of neo-Hasidism in the last generation, the enthusiasm for Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, whose thought is fraught with existentialism, and the interest in all strata of Jewish mystical literature. The existential language of mysticism, the spirit, and the soul, has suddenly become more comprehensive, and many people connect to it instantly. There is a clear sense that the consciousness of this generation, both collectively and individually, is wired in a different way, working on “vibes” and “energies.” It differs radically from the cognitive paradigms of the preceding centuries, which generated Jewish philosophy, halakha, and ideals. Perhaps this is a counter-reaction to new technology and the digital revolution, or perhaps it is part of this contemporary process—this question is beyond our purview here.

Sabbatai Sevi and those around him have enjoyed a resurgence of interest as part of this process. This is neither due to a messianic tension, surge, and hope, nor due to a desire for national redemption, but, rather, as part of the search for personal redemption in the writings and legacy he left behind. Sabbateanism, today, is once again fascinating the public consciousness; new studies are appearing, and the academy is replete with symposia, lectures, and research groups. Because Jewish mystical language is more easily and widely absorbed today, the time is ripe for a resurgence of interest in Sabbatai Sevi.

Although contemporary interest in mysticism began with the help of researchers and historians, it has long since been liberated from their monopoly and has become part of popular culture (both Jewish and non-Jewish; see Madonna, *et al.*). Like any spiritual-mystical theory, Kabbalistic and Hasidic spirituality are dynamic and undergo transformations as they are reabsorbed in the consciousness of the present generation. In almost every decade, a natural and vital need is felt to reinterpret Kabbalistic language and adjust the discourse to meet the contemporary consciousness. The first scholars who addressed this field, such as Gershom Scholem, occupy places of honor as pioneers and early interpreters, but the many decades that have passed since demand a newer and more adapted approach—more creative, fluid, and vigorous, based on those who first paved the way, but breaking new ground in Israeli academia and larger spiritual life (and in similar but differing ways abroad).

It is on this background that we note the arrival of the Hebrew novel *Nehemiah* by the scholar and writer Yakov Z. Mayer, which appeared in Israel in November 2019, and became a surprising best-seller. The book marks a transition from the generation of academic scholarship about mysticism to a generation of experience grounded in the existing knowledge—from “about it” to a neo-spiritualized version of “it” itself. The book has aroused considerable interest in Israel and has occupied headlines in newspapers, literary supplements, and in social media—an unusual phenomenon for a historical novel.

Is this an important book in terms of the study of Jewish thought and the history of the Sabbatean movement? I believe so. Although it belongs to the genre of historical fiction, it serves to complement the scholarly picture available to us. There is something fascinating about viewing the story of Sabbatai Sevi through the eyes of a third player, as distinct from the two with whom we are most familiar: Sabbatai Sevi himself, and his main apostle, Nathan of Gaza. This is particularly true given that the author is a scholar who presents a relatively reliable historical picture—if not in its details, then at least in its essence and in the surrounding contemporary reality, as we shall see below.

This novel focuses its gaze on the Polish Kabbalist Nehemiah Cohen, an obscure figure about whom we have little real information, except for the fact that he met with Sabbatai Sevi and subsequently, like Sabbatai, converted to Islam.¹

¹ A survey of the known historical record can be found in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, translated by R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton University Press, 1973), 658–668.

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In a Facebook post, the critic Aviad Goldman detailed the scholarly versions concerning Nehemiah. Scholem, the pioneering scholar of Sabbateanism, presented a version of Nehemiah's biography and apostasy adapted from a description provided by a Catholic priest who was present at the meeting of Nehemiah and Sabbatai. Nehemiah himself presented this version of the events, as recounted shortly before his death to a naïve Jew in Amsterdam (R. Laibel ben Ozer), and as quoted in the afterword to the novel. According to this version, Nehemiah spent three days and three nights debating Sabbatai Sevi, and when he realized that Sabbatai was a false messiah, he converted to Islam so that the Jews, true believers in Sabbatai's messianic status, would not kill him. At that point he then informed on him to the Sultan, exposing Sabbatai a charlatan.

A different account is offered by R. Jacob Sasportas, the first Sabbatean hunter, who claims that Nehemiah himself was a sincere Sabbatean and was sent to convert to Islam by Sabbatai himself.² Mayer more or less adopts Sasportas' version, arguing that Nehemiah was exploited by Sabbatai Sevi and his associates. He was sent to convert to Islam under threat so that the Ottomans would refrain from persecuting Sabbatai himself. When this move proved unsuccessful, Nehemiah was accused of betraying Sabbatai Sevi by handing him over to the Ottoman authorities.

Mayer has created a literary portrait of Nehemiah and weaves convoluted plots around his protagonist. Mayer's Nehemiah is complex, skeptical, deceitful, and crafty; above all, he is constantly trying to get something that he does not and will never have. Mayer's Nehemiah comes across as an almost postmodern character with a tortured soul.

I deliberately refrain here from the common practice of labeling Sabbatai Sevi a "false messiah." We must recall that a messiah never operates in a vacuum but is a figure who appears as a reflection of, and in relation to, the expectations of his awaiting congregation. These two sides together, redeemer and redeemed, create the messianic phenomenon. With this in mind, the life of the messiah *as perceived by his congregation* is always the most compelling story. The novel before us presents the world of the simple folk who flock after the new messiah, and the author guides his hero through the thorny byroads of the margins of Jewish society: a tortured figure vacillates between integrity and deception, accompanied by great scholars alongside pimps and frauds.

Yakov Z. Mayer is a *talmid hakham*, scholar, and historian whose principle academic field is the history of the Hebrew book. When reading

² This account is most recently described in Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 108–116.

his novel, it is difficult to distinguish between the narrator and the historian; the two blend together. Mayer follows in the tradition of the picaresque novel, which centers on a roguish but dynamic hero who embarks on an eventful journey of twists and turns. The novel is replete with episodes and adventures, detective work and chases; indeed, there is virtually no genre from the field of action literature that is not woven into the plot, sometimes to an extent that I found excessive. As you enter the novel, you embark on a journey of your own, becoming the quintessential and eternal wandering Jew. As I read, I traveled with Nehemiah through the landscapes of Poland, the monasteries and markets, the roads and roadsides, the wagons and merchandise. (One of the book's charms is a delightful foldout map of Europe, tracing Nehemiah's wanderings from Komarno and Lemberg, through a voyage in the heart of the seas to Constantinople and Gallipoli, and on to Amsterdam.) This is a surprising novel: every page brings some unanticipated development, serving only to obscure the next twist in the road ahead.

As a historian, Mayer enriches his work with credible topical details relating to every facet of seventeenth-century life: the utensils and foodstuffs; the dress and customs of the Jews; the arrival of coffee, gunpowder, and magnets, and so on. Above all, he artfully depicts his heroes as marginal and dubious figures from the underworld of Jewish society, who roam in packs across Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, pining and longing for the rumored messiah Sabbatai Sevi, who attracts them from a distance, exercising some pull over their imaginations by some odd quality, even before they have encountered him in the flesh.

Most of the characters in the novel deliberately lack a decisive character; they are rather elusive and play second fiddle to the hero. They meet Nehemiah at different crossroads in his journey and change functions in the plot as they appear along the adventurous and fantastical obstacle course he is running to get to the messiah in Constantinople, and then to find his escape.

Alongside these human players, the author adds secondary figures from the animal world that add to the atmosphere of fantasy. A dog called Bird, a rhyming parrot called the Rebbe, and, above all, a secondary character so important that he appears on the book cover: the human bear, or the ursine human, who serves as a metaphor for all the shady characters in the novel. The hero Nehemiah has six fingers on his right hand, and on almost every page in the book he passes this hand through his long straight beard in a magical gesture. Although he is supposed to be a conventional Polish rabbi, in practice he shows signs of personality disorder and commits almost every possible transgression on his way to the messiah; whether he

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does so willingly or under duress is left to the reader to decide. The content of his fateful encounter with Sabbatai Sevi is cloaked in obscurity until the end, when the entire tale is recounted by the sexton of the Amsterdam community, an actual historical figure who provides the source material on which the novel bases itself.

In order to draw his characters and their seventeenth century world closer to the contemporary Hebrew reader, Mayer equips his heroes with an interesting linguistic blend. Sometimes they speak a rich Hebrew, replete with rhyming verses and midrashic quotes in the spirit of the Sages; sometimes they speak an insolent gutter jargon, though we all know that such a Hebrew did not exist at the time. The hero of the novel occasionally employs contemporary locutions: “You’re a real one, you are,” or refers to the messiah’s followers as *Shabbtaitzvinikim*, a distinctly twentieth-century slang. But all this does not obscure the author’s outstanding mastery of the Jewish languages of the time. The Ottomans are called “*Tugrama*,” the term “Greeks” refers to the Cossacks; and the Tatars are “Kedarites.” Even the Ukrainians do not speak Ruthenian, but “Goyish” (just as Latin is referred to in Yiddish as *Gelakhes*, the language of the *galakhim* or priests).

But what of the historiographic position embedded in the novel? Gershom Scholem long ago established that Sabbateanism was the most subversive challenge to the halakhic establishment during the centuries before the Enlightenment. In his novel, Yakov Z. Mayer the historian seeks to propose a different approach, and to suggest that halakhic Judaism and Sabbateanism did not travel entirely separate paths. The character most closely identified with Polish halakhic rulings is Rabbi David Halevy Segal, known as Taz, the author of *Turei Zahav*, a commentary on *Shulhan Arukh*; both the rabbi and his work play a central role in the plot. The author of *Turei Zahav* supported Sabbatai Sevi, and even sent his son to ask Sabbatai for a blessing and healing (according to the source on which Mayer relies, this incident indeed occurred).

The author shapes Nehemiah as a character who mediates between *halakha* and Sabbateanism, seeking to enjoy the best of both worlds. He is not only a “*Ba’al Shem*,” that is to say an itinerant healer trading in spells and amulets, but also a rabbi, scholar, and Talmudist, who shares a close relationship with Taz and other halakhic authorities. Through all his adventures, Nehemiah seeks to publish halakhic texts, including some he obtained by less-than-kosher means.

This novel, then, presents a viewpoint that halakha and Sabbateanism were two parallel political forces, each with its own rhythms, acting in tandem on the Jewish world. As a character straddling the border between

the two worlds, Nehemiah seeks to profit from each, though he does so in his own devious manner. In this way he gets tied up in complications, beset by every possible obstacle, and we are left with the sense that the reasons for his conversion to Islam, like all his other decisions, were not clear even to Nehemiah himself.

The novel *Nehemiah* continues to fascinate the Israeli press and social media many months after its publication. In a Facebook post, the critic Hagai Ben Arza observed:

The book plays heavily on the narrow boundary between truth and fiction. Indeed, the choice to weave a work of fiction around historical figures inevitably creates a constant tension that urges us to get to the bottom of things. What are we reading here? An imagined falsehood or a substantiated fact? Nehemiah himself embodies this tension. In simple terms, he is a con man. Trickery is not merely his livelihood, but a psychological attitude. Nehemiah is never free from doubts regarding his own motives, and this shapes his profound skepticism toward others, including those closest to him (if anyone can be close to him). [An early scene of his childhood] offers us the origins of his cynical approach, and the fact that Nehemiah himself then goes on to become a con man is a classic example of intergenerational transfer.

Thus the truly sophisticated part of the plot comes at the only moment when Nehemiah loses his doubts, indeed loses his world, and realizes that he has been outmaneuvered by a superior scoundrel. His response to this move is to completely relinquish control over his own life or that of others.

Some psychologists have argued that society's attitude toward the victims of fraud is based on victim blaming—since the victim failed to identify the warning signs, they received the punishment they deserved. The purpose behind this attitude is to prevent ourselves from falling victims to fraud. Apparently, even con men themselves accept this approach.

In conclusion, *Nehemiah* is not the first novel that seeks to add literary color and detail to the tempest provoked by Sabbatai Sevi among the Jews in the seventeenth century. The novel's antecedents include Isaac Bashevis Singer's first published work *Satan in Goray* (Yiddish, 1933) and A.S. Stein's *Duda'ei Tzevi* (Hebrew, 1955), along with the work of other Zionist authors. The innovation offered by this masterful novel, however, is the focus on the Polish Kabbalist Nehemiah Cohen, and the emphasis on his historical role in the game of tag between messianism and halakhic Judaism, and between the margins and the establishment. In the finest

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tradition of the picaresque novel, Nehemiah undergoes countless adventures populated by richly drawn characters; by the time he emerges, he does not even recognize his own image in the mirror. The hero poignantly declares at the end of the novel that “he has lived his life twice, once going forward and once in reverse.” Such was the Sabbatean movement. The story of its return to the annals of history is longer than the story of its emergence; indeed, in many senses this story has not yet been completed.

The mystery of messianism captivated scholars, leaders, and writers in the twentieth century, as the imagination of the Jewish people was fueled with thoughts of that other “messianic” movement, Zionism, and its promise of national redemption. Most of them chose to depict Nehemiah through the prism of traditional conservatism, the stream that ultimately led to the downfall of Sabbatai Sevi. What place do Sabbateanism or messianism have in our own times? The author piques our interest about such questions, but offers no real answer—and perhaps there is no need for such.

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