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“The apocalyptic sting”: Zionism as Messianism (Vision)

There is a cosmic element in nationality which is its basic ingredient.

—Aaron David Gordon, “Our Tasks Ahead” (1920)

We shall discharge the great and difficult task that is laid upon us only if we are true to the great vision of the Latter Days which Israel’s Prophet’s foresaw and which will surely come to pass.

—David Ben-Gurion, “Science and Ethics: The Contributions of Greece, India and Israel” (1960)

Terror drives much theorisation
Into a tumult of totalisation.
Whatever the problem, Death or Passion,
One solves it in transcendental fashion.

—Gershom Scholem, “The Official Abecedarium”
(to Walter Benjamin, December 5, 1927)

We have nationalised God.

—Christian Gauss, “The End of Nationalism” (1934)

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On December 12, 1665, Shabtai Zvi, mystical messiah, advanced on the Portuguese Synagogue in Smyrna accompanied by a motley gathering of “everyone who was in distress and trouble and all vain and light persons.”¹ The rabbis, who did not believe in him, had locked the entrance, whereupon Zvi asked for an axe and hacked down the door. Once inside, he preached a blasphemous sermon, exempted the congregation from the duty of prayer, and announced that the Pentateuch was holier than the Torah; he then proceeded to appoint his first brother king of Turkey and his second emperor of Rome, and to distribute kingdoms to the various members, men and women, of the congregation.

On the following Monday, there was “great rejoicing as the Scroll of the Law was taken from the Ark”; Zvi sang songs including impure ones (Christian songs in the vernacular), declared the day his own personal Sabbath, and at night held a banquet where he distributed “money and candies” and forced all, Jews and Gentiles alike, to utter the ineffable Name.² This was, according to Gershom Scholem, from whose magisterial study of Zvi I take these details, the scandal that inaugurated his rule over the Jewish community of Smyrna. From the moment Shabtai Zvi was declared by Nathan of Gaza, his spiritual counselor and companion, fit to be the king of Israel, his reputation spread like wildfire across Arabia and to Europe. “Jews in Holland, England and Venice—hard-headed business men, bankers and traders,” observed Chaim Weizmann—who would become Israel’s first president—to the Palestine Royal Commission in Jerusalem in 1936, “gathered round this man.”³ A monstrous figure—Scholem describes him as the most

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hideous and uncanny figure in the whole history of Jewish messianism—Zvi fired the imaginations of the worldwide Jewish community by scandalizing supporters and opponents alike.⁴ Performance artist of the forbidden, Zvi presented a paradox—not that of a saint who suffers and whose suffering is mysteriously bound to God, but that of a saint who is outrageous, a saint who sins.⁵ For Scholem, who runs a line directly from Shabtai Zvi to the Zionism that is the focus of this study, this paradox is key: “A faith based on this destructive paradox has lost its innocence.”⁶ Destruction or even wantonness lay at the root of Zvi’s capacity to inspire. The Messiah brushes, consorts with evil as much as he defeats it. Zvi exhorted his followers to blasphemy. His power rested at least partially in the relish and agony with which he appeared to violate sacred law.

As our Smyrna story tells us, Zvi also arrogated to himself the power to distribute the kingdoms of the world among women and men. He may have been divinely inspired (more later), but his reign was also firmly over this earth. Proto-Zionist, his historic task was to return the Jews to Palestine. According to Weizmann, not only did Cromwell believe in Zvi’s mission, but it was this belief that lay behind his historic decision to invite the Jews to return to England (there were then no Jews in England, and it was apparently believed that the Messiah could come only when the Dispersion was complete).⁷ It is central to Jewish messianism—to the consternation of official Christianity—that messianic hope is material and carnal as well as spiritual, fully embodied in political time. It must be visible, not unseen. The Jews, writes Scholem, “tended to pride themselves on this al-

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leged shortcoming,” seeing no spiritual progress in a messianic conception that announced its abdication from the sphere of history.⁸ “Of the wondrous certainty of pure inwardness,” characteristic of Christian belief, the Jews thought nothing: “I do not say: thought little, but thought nothing at all.”⁹

In Jewish belief, history was still hovering, expectant. Redemption was public and historic, a grandiose act to be dramatized on the world’s stage. Zvi’s proclaimed kingship of Israel became a literally self-fulfilling prophecy. In the same year as the Smyrna scandal, reports started to spread of the arrival of the lost tribes of Israel. From Tunis it was claimed that the 1665 caravan from Mecca could not leave, as the city was besieged by the children of Israel. There is an uncanny anticipation here of Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, who expended much of his energies in futile diplomatic attempts to negotiate with the Turkish sultan. During the 1665 siege, it was reported that the sultan offered up Alexandria and Tunis to the conquerors on condition that they give up Mecca, “but they have demanded the entire Holy Land.”¹⁰

From Sale in Morocco, the Ten Tribes of Israel were reported as appearing daily in greater and greater multitudes, about eight thousand troops covering a vast tract of ground—strangers, an unknown People whose language those who went to inquire of them “understood not.”¹¹ An army of mythic potency, although they carry no guns—“their Arms are swords, bows, arrows and lances”—“whosoever goeth to contend with this People in Battel, are presently vanquished and slain.”¹² At their head, their “Chief Leader,” was a “Holy Man” who

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“marcheth before them, doing miracles.”¹³ These reports spread. Letters from Egypt referring to the appearance of the lost tribes in Arabia arrived in Amsterdam and were carried from there across Europe. When the reports from Arabia and Morocco merged, the “Arabian” army became the vanguard of an even larger Jewish army advancing from Africa. With every report the numbers grew, from tens of thousands, to three hundred thousand, to millions.

What interests me in this uncanny story—the reason why I start here—is its strange inmixing of visionary and political power. Zvi reads like an extravagant parody of inspirational man and deadly political chief. He communes deliriously with the Godhead, while hacking down the synagogue with one hand and distributing kingdoms with the other. His catastrophic radiance transmutes, almost instantaneously, into worldly authority. In a flash it empowers itself. Zvi creates a nation of multitudes out of thin air. The Ten Tribes of Israel are conquerors, invested messianically with unconditional, absolute might: “none are able to stand up against them”; “He shall cry, yea, roar, he shall prevail against his enemies.”¹⁴ When I interviewed Tamara and Aaron Deutsch at the Allon Shvut settlement outside Jerusalem in the summer of 2002 for a documentary I was presenting for Channel 4 Television in England, they told me that, although the situation in Israel had deteriorated sharply since they had arrived from Staten Island only a short eighteen months before, they nonetheless felt “invincible.” I found in their dialogue the same medley of comfort and horror (comfort *in* horror) that Scholem places at the heart of one strand of apocalyptic messian-

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ism.¹⁵ According to messianic legend, Israel—although it will ultimately be led through all tribulations to national redemption—will have to bear its share of suffering in the final cataclysm.¹⁶ Redemption will not be realized without ruin and dread.¹⁷ For the vision to hold, there must be slaying and being slain. “We went to visit the hospitals,” the Deutsches explained; “they told us that due to this intifada . . . by blowing us up in buses and in crowded malls and wherever they might be, the birthrate has gone up dramatically.”¹⁸

This is horror in the service of national increase (the idea of a surfeit of horror acquires a new meaning). In 1929 and 1936–39, the years of the worst Arab-Jewish confrontations in Palestine, the number of *olim*, or pioneers, among emigrants climbed, only to fall during periods of relative calm; the rate of emigration from Britain rose from 760 to 832 in the year after the Yom Kippur War, increased with the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, and continued to climb up to 2002 (although by 2003 immigration was at its lowest level since 1989).¹⁹ “We are,” insisted the Deutsches, “happier than ever”—even though there are nights when they are “spooked” in their own homes: “You are just part of the destiny and the mystery and life.”²⁰ Not quite exultant, certainly exhilarated. Danger, they acknowledged, was a pull: “People love reading and hearing about destruction and terror. They lap it up like there’s no tomorrow.”²¹ Note how the vision of the apocalypse—“like there’s no tomorrow”—has slipped into the common verbal coinage of the day.

Two years later, this language has in many ways become even louder and more and fervent than before. In

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May 2004 Ariel Sharon's plan to evacuate the Gaza Strip and take out the settlements was defeated in a poll of his party, Likud. "If, God forbid, there is a disengagement," states Nissim Bracha of Gush Katif, one of the key settlements in Gaza designated by the plan, "I am going to destroy everything."²² For Hagi Ben Artzi, religious Zionist and member of Gush Emunim (the Block of the Faithful), a national disaster is approaching: "And not an ordinary disaster, but in monstrous proportions—the collapse of the process of Jewish redemption."²³ To remove one settlement is to destroy not just the spiritual foundations of Zionism, not just the State of Israel, but the whole world. A minimal return of land—enacted unilaterally, without negotiation with the Palestinians, and promising nothing even vaguely close to a viable Palestinian statehood—is a violation of the Torah. Ben Artzi will commit himself to *mesirut nevesh*, or total devotion (when asked, he does not object to the analogy with the Islamic concept of martyrdom).

Catastrophe will be met with catastrophe. The word of God transcends the laws of state. "We have another partner in these decisions," Effi Eitam of the National Religious Party explained, as he threatened to withdraw from the coalition in response to Sharon's plan, "the master of the universe. We must show the master of the universe that we are willing to sacrifice our souls for the land."²⁴ According to one strand of Jewish thought, God's personal dignity requires the redemption of Israel. Without it, his name is profaned.²⁵ Ariel Sharon is guilty of defilement. Behind the rhetoric we can recognize the signs of more prosaic forms of disgust. "That this beautiful place will become the home of Arabs," states Ofra

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Shoat of Bdolah (another threatened settlement in Gaza), “This is something I can’t digest.”²⁶

These voices are not representative of the whole of Israel—far from it; more than half of the nation supported Sharon’s disengagement plan. But today in Israel, catastrophe has become an identity. *Ha’aretz* feature writer Doron Rosenblum entitles a recent article “Cashing In on Catastrophe,” or “how it comes about that every event and/or terrorist attack ‘only proves’, and even reinforces, what we already thought anyway.”²⁷ In a cruel twist, horror, however genuinely feared, redeems Israel’s view of itself.

For contemporary Jewish thinker David Hartman, founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, messianism poses the greatest threat to Israel today.²⁸ The nation must be brought back to earth, to the slow accommodations and political work of nonredemptive time, if it is not to destroy itself. God must be lifted out of history. With the birth of Israel, nationalism became the new messianism—the aura of the sacred, with all its glory and tribulations, passed to the state. Israel is not the only nation to believe its mandate is holy. Nor do all its citizens believe in the nation’s divine sanction. For that very reason, I suggest, Israel offers us something of dramatic resonance for thinking about nationalism in the modern world: a nation vested in, at times struggling with—but repeatedly failing to discard—the mantle of God. Throughout the slow growth of Zionism as spirit and idea, messianism has cast its supernal light over the birth of Israel, “licking at the edges of its thought.”²⁹

According to Scholem, a line can be run from acute messianism to Zionism, but Shabtai Zvi’s revolutionary

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messianism, and indeed the whole strand of apocalyptic messianism, have been more or less suppressed, a suppression that has robbed Judaism of one of its most creative and destructive components.³⁰ In the process, a key component of Zionist self-imagining has been pushed to one side, represented as extreme only, as if being in extremis, politically and cosmically, had not always been a central part of the inner formation, if not quite rationale, of the Jewish state. Part of the purpose of this first chapter will therefore be to revive the line from messianism to Zionism and carry it over to some of the secular founders of the nation who, historians of Zionism mostly insist, have nothing to do with it. In fact for Scholem, without Shabtai Zvi, there would have been no Zionist secularism, whose break with Orthodoxy was made possible only by Shabtaism's iconoclastic and anarchic "breeze"; the doctrine of the holiness of sin paved the way for indifference to all traditional Jewish law. Certainly the Orthodox opponents of early Zionism, responding to the first stirrings of the Hibbat Zion movement in the early nineteenth century, did not hesitate to make the link: "They are a new sect like that of Shabatai Zevi," pronounced the rabbi of Brisk in 1889, "may the names of evil-doers rot."³¹

At its most simple, Zionism can be understood as the first Jewish messianic movement after Zvi. This was certainly the view of Hannah Arendt, who saw Shabtaism as the "last great Jewish political activity," and the Jewish people, once the messianic hope of Shabtaism had been dashed, as essentially adrift in a world whose course no longer made sense.³² Once it collapsed, the Jews lost, not only their faith in "a divine beginning and

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divine culmination of history,” but also their guide “through the wilderness of bare facts.”³³ Zionism can then be seen as the first movement to pick up—even more, to *revive from the dead*—this forsaken strain. In *Rome and Jerusalem*, which predates Herzl’s epoch-making pamphlet *Der Judenstaat—The Jewish State or The Jews’ State*—by more than thirty years, Moses Hess, socialist, early Zionist, claims messianism as the specific Jewish contribution to world culture: “the moment of the eternal quest, the element of permanent ferment” without which the Jews are “ghostlike,” “unable to live or be revived alike.”³⁴

But in tracing this path, I also hope to get closer to what I see as one of the peculiarities of Zionism as a movement, a characteristic that might explain something of its compelling inner force. Horror can reside at the heart of divinity. It can give comfort, be a form of solace in an unkind, at times horrendous, world. Jewish dereliction and messianism could be seen as the two sources of Zionist discourse; or “terror” and “exultation,” to use Edward Said’s terms (he is discussing the need for Arab understanding of the “internal cohesion and solidity” of Israel for the Jewish people).³⁵ There is perhaps no more dangerous mixture for a political movement than that of being at once horrified by history and divinely inspired. From the beginning, Zionism sets out its stall on this fantasmatic terrain. “I believe,” wrote J. L. Talmon—early lecturer in history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in *The Nature of Jewish History*—“that Jews are to be defined as a community of fate.”³⁶ Why is it that whatever happens, however bloody and dire, Israel always appears—at once fervently and tragically—to be

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somehow fulfilling itself? I include in that claim the possibility voiced recently by Daniel Barenboim and David Grossman, as well as Yaakov Perry, head of Shin Bet from 1988 to 1995, among others, that for the first time since its creation Israel might cease to exist.³⁷ Zionism has always felt itself under threat and often for good reason—the Arabs did not want, and many still do not want, a Jewish state in their midst. But things become more complicated if disaster is not only feared but also anticipated as part of God’s plan. In the messianic view of world history, it is part of the cosmic order of things that the nation must live on a knife’s edge.



This book arises for me out of an anguished curiosity. Appalled by what the Israeli state perpetrates on a daily basis in the name of the Jewish people, committed to Palestinian self-determination, or to full political and civic equality, I am nonetheless unable to follow some of the most obvious paths open to someone for whom this is the case. I am not happy, to put it at its most simple, to treat Zionism as an insult. A dirty word. Today, notably since 9/11, Zionism has, I believe, become almost impossible to talk about. “Look,” insisted distinguished poet and critic Tom Paulin, “you’re either a Zionist or an anti-Zionist, there’s no middle way. Everyone who supports the state of Israel is a Zionist.”³⁸ Everything hangs of course on that word “support.” There is no doubt in my mind that since 9/11 Ariel Sharon has hijacked the antiterrorist agenda to impose more and more brutal policies on the occupied territories. First the “road map” and now the proposed pullout from Gaza: both

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appear as temporary adjustments of an utterly ruthless and consistent long-term plan. It is now clearer than ever before that this aim, with the full backing of the United States, is to render completely unviable any prospect of a Palestinian state (by Sharon's own account, it would include only 47 percent of the West Bank). Since 9/11, it has also become, if not impossible, at least much much harder in the United States, on the topic of Israel, to voice any dissent. I support neither the policies nor the silencing of critique. But "Zionist or anti-Zionist" issues a taboo. It makes of Zionism an unthinkable object. This is Georges Bensoussan opening his monumental study of the intellectual and political history of Zionism, which was published in Paris in 2002:

The adjective [Zionist] hits out like an insult. Today the term carries such pejorative, disparaging connotations that the reality behind it has ended up disappearing under layers of stigmatization. Even, on certain international occasions, becoming diabolical. . . . But to reject Zionism, a basically atypical national ideology and movement, by stigmatizing it tells us neither what it is, nor even more what it was. Behind the exclusive focus on the Jewish-Arab conflict, the question has simply disappeared.³⁹

In a strange repetition of messianism, Zionism seems to require either unconditional rejection or belief. You are Zionist or anti-Zionist. No argument. In fact inside Israel, "anti-Zionist" has a very specific meaning—it refers to those who see the project in Palestine as colonialist from the start (unlike left Zionists, for whom things began to go wrong only with the occupation of the territories that followed the 1967 Six-Day War). But there

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were also Zionists—Noam Chomsky was one of them in his youth—who believed that the Jews in Palestine should never acquire a sovereign state. And there were others before him, like Martin Buber, for whom the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was, to use the term of the Palestinian refugees, a “catastrophe.” Does it make any difference—can it make a difference today (the question of the second chapter)—that Zionism was from the beginning riven by internal critique?

This study therefore asks of the reader to do what may well seem impossible. To suspend both belief and disbelief. To try to enter the imaginative mind-set of Zionism in order to understand why it commands such passionate and seemingly intractable allegiance. I am convinced that a simple dismissal of Zionism fatally undermines the case it is intended to promote. On three grounds. First political. As Lenin once said, you must always construe your enemy at their strongest point. Otherwise your refusal or blindness will expose you to the enemy’s unacknowledged strengths. Second, psychoanalytic. Insult an identity and you will drive it in deeper (for the same reason, you will not have any effect on Zionism by simply accusing it of being based on a set of myths). Finally, historical. Such a dismissal leaves us in complete ignorance as to what Zionism is, or was. “To paraphrase Marc Bloch to the historians of the French Revolution,” Bensoussan concludes his opening paragraph, “we would like to say to the present-day protagonists: ‘Zionists, anti-Zionists, for pity’s sake tell us what Zionism was!’ ”⁴⁰

Recent critics of Israel’s policies, faced with the charge of anti-Semitism, are quick to say that their target is not

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Jews but Zionism. This is not necessarily helpful. Not just because defenders of Israel's current policies will retort that the distinction is not viable if what is at stake is the right to self-defense of a Jewish nation. But more because, even where the distinction is accepted, Zionism ceases at that moment to be talked about. Or else, in an equally reductive, though largely unspoken, move, Zionism is presumed to be wholly represented by the worst activities of the state. Either way, as a divided, torn, fraught historic entity, Zionism slips back into a nightmare or a dream. Today we are often told either that the worst of Israel is the fulfillment of Zionism or that Israel today is a travesty of the true spirit of the earliest Zionist faith. Taken together these apparently contradictory views both have a kernel of truth, but either one on its own is a mistake.

Paulin is not alone in believing that between Zionism and anti-Zionism there is “no middle way.” You identify or you attack—the options repeat the history of the Israeli nation-state. We can, I think, do better. I therefore want to issue a wager, or use this study to attempt an experiment. To enter the house of Zionism without blocking the exits. To try to understand what Zionism thought, at the deepest and often most disturbing level, it was doing, in its own language and terms, without cutting off the path to dissent. To use my own paraphrase of the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, writing on the aesthetic options available after the Russian Revolution, “there is no third path and that is the one we are going to take.”

I start on the basis that Zionism is one of the most potent collective movements of the twentieth century,

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whose potency needs urgently to be understood. It has the capacity to foster identifications that are as immutable as, indeed, the ineffable Name. As a movement, Zionism has the power, that is, to sacralize itself. For its supporters that is of course its divinely sanctioned purpose and strength. For its detractors, that is the delusion on which the destructiveness of the present-day Israeli state most fundamentally rests. But to call something a delusion does not satisfy me. Something can be both a delusion and actual; effective and insane. In a famous exchange with Jung, Freud insisted that when patients are preoccupied with their childhood, there is no point in the analyst's objecting that their obsession is evasive or illusory, a turning away from the tasks of adult life. For even were this true, if you say as much, you will merely provoke the fiercest resistance. People are stubborn in their beliefs. States of conviction, drawing their force from the depths of the soul and of history, brook no argument. Shabtaism was nothing if not obdurate. Even when Zvi committed apostasy by converting to Islam, the worst betrayal, many of his followers remained undeterred. "Enthusiasm and love know of no hopeless situations," writes Renan on the Christian apostles when their hopes of redemption had been dashed. Scholem cites him with reference to Zvi: "They play with the impossible, and rather than despair, they violate reality."⁴¹

Violating reality is something that more than one Zionist has been perfectly happy to acknowledge that they do. The famous epigraph to Theodor Herzl's 1902 novel *Altneuland* reads, "If you will, it is no fairy tale."⁴² In the epilogue the narrator addresses his book as a child:

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“[Your father] believes that dreaming is as good a way to spend your time on earth as any other, and dream and action are not so far apart as is often thought. All the activity of mankind was a dream once and will again be a dream.”⁴³ In fact this could be seen as a sacrilege, as it suggests Israel might revert to a dream. But Zionism is a movement that foregrounds its own fantasmatic dimension. Against its own shibboleth—“a land without a people for a people without a land”—it always knew it was propelling itself into an imaginary and perhaps unrealizable space. Before anything else, Zionism presents itself as a movement of hope and desire, with no necessary purchase on the ground that it would finally summon beneath its feet. To be a Zionist, Chaim Weizmann comments in 1909, “it was not necessary, in the first place, to be convinced that the idea could be carried out.”⁴⁴ “We have to create our title out of our wish to go to Palestine” (perhaps the clearest, most politically frank version of what Freud will term magical thinking or omnipotence of thoughts).⁴⁵ In 1903 Weizmann had written to Gregory Lurie, “[A]s a concrete proposition, [Palestine] does not even come within our comprehension.”⁴⁶ Zionism presents us with a political movement that appears to be at once unanswerable and unreal. Freud’s (or Jung’s) patient does not know he is deluded. But Zionism, as we will see, is a violation of reality that knows its own delusion. And runs with it.

Let’s begin therefore—it is the basic axiom of psychoanalysis—by respecting the symptom. “It is the Zionist’s good fortune,” declared Chaim Weizmann at a Zionist meeting in Paris in 1914, “that they are considered mad; if we were normal, we would not consider going to Pales-

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tine but stay put like all normal people.”⁴⁷ We are therefore doing no more than following the first president of the State of Israel if we take Zionism to be a form of collective insanity. But with this caveat: that there is no sanity when it comes to the ethos of the group. “The diagnosis of communal neurosis,” Freud writes, “is faced with special difficulty.” “In an individual neurosis we take as our starting-point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be ‘normal’.”⁴⁸ But for a group “all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist.”⁴⁹ There is no normal yardstick by which we can measure the neurosis of the group. All-absorbing, a group is its own environment, creates its own world. If group identifications are so lethal, it is because they swallow up their own reserve. Freud comes very close—other analysts will get closer—to stating that groups are mad. By definition.

It is the characteristic of most groups that boundaries melt on the inside (members of a group become as one), harden—arm themselves—all around the edge. To return to Shabtai Zvi: no enemy will survive in combat against Israel, but inside the circle of the chosen, or at least in the person of the Messiah, the barriers scandalously crumble between man and the divine. Into his own person and history, Zvi draws the wild, dark core that subsists at the heart of the collective passion called Zionism.



Messianism flourishes in dark times. Like Zionism, it is the child of exile. “In the history of Judaism,” writes Scholem, the influence of messianism “has been exer-

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cised almost exclusively under the conditions of the exile as a primary reality of Jewish life and of Jewish history.”⁵⁰ Delivering his address to the Jubilee of the First Zionist Congress in Basel in August 1947, Chaim Weizmann described how Theodor Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat* immediately won the hearts of the Jewish masses because it appeared at a moment when the horizon for Russian Polish Jewry was looking so bleak: “There was something messianic in it. . . . At times like these there is always a recrudescence of messianic hope”—he was speaking in the year of the UN charter for a partitioned Palestine.⁵¹ In January 1940, in the thick of the war, which can fairly be described as the darkest time, Weizmann had addressed a crowd estimated at six thousand at the Mecca Temple in New York: “The path we are treading is very hard indeed. It now looks almost like the travails before redemption.”⁵²

Shabtaism itself arose, as Scholem stresses, in the aftermath of the Chiemnilitski massacre in Poland in 1648 when a petty officer of the Ukrainian forces united with the Cossacks and went on a marauding expedition into the country slaughtering the Jews; the gloom and sense of hopelessness weighing down the next generation in Poland provided a rich breeding ground for mystical and messianic hopes.⁵³ Chiemnilitski would pass into folklore—a crucial part of Jewish collective consciousness, it is still referred to by Israeli leaders today. Nor was it only the disasters of the Polish Jews that inspired messianic hope. Spectacular rises to prosperity in the Jewish community of the Diaspora were seen as no less a reason for anxiety. Nothing crystallized, nothing held. In the face of such instability, writings laced with the

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eschatological mood of the age were eagerly read throughout the Jewish world.⁵⁴

Up to 1492, the messianic strand of Judaism had waned, but after the expulsion, the exiles from Spain responded “with a wave of apocalyptic agitation,” “messianic birth pangs” that would eventually reach their apotheosis in the life and movement of Shabtai Zvi.⁵⁵ Redemption arises on the ruins of history. Disaster must be meaningful if it is to be borne. “The bitter experience of many generations that had tasted the heavy yoke of alien rule, oppression and humiliation,” writes Scholem, “was not likely to mitigate the violence of this type of eschatology, whose roots go back to the apocalyptic literature of the period of the Second Temple.”⁵⁶ Messianic legend drenches itself in “uninhibited fantasies” about the catastrophic aspects of redemption. Born of catastrophe, it promises more. “Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature,” writes Scholem, “a theory of catastrophe. . . . *This cannot be sufficiently emphasised.*”⁵⁷ When Maimonides tried to abolish messianism as a historical force—indeed, retracing this path, David Hartman invokes Maimonides in making his appeal against the messianism of Israel today—early sixteenth-century Jewish writers, such as Don Isaac Abravanel and R. Loew of Prague, taking their cue from the expulsion, responded by bringing its catastrophic dimension once again to the fore. In the apocalyptic imagination, comfort and horror had an equal share, allowing a persecuted and downtrodden people to balance “many a bitter account with its torturers.”⁵⁸ Messianic redemption is therefore a form of historic revenge. To put it crudely,

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it is a way of settling scores. The violence of a cruel history repeats itself as its own cure.

There is a paradox here. It was misery that drew the Jewish people to the apocalyptic tradition and its message of catastrophe. But as they move forward to the dawn of a new history, the misery accompanies the vision, lodges itself inexorably inside the dream. The future that is meant to redeem you borrows the most dreaded trait of the past. However utopian the hopes, the worst will not let go (it carries over like a demented, never-ending mathematical game).

According to an opinion poll in 2002, more than 80 percent of Israelis wanted a peace deal with the Palestinians; more than 80 percent supported Sharon's brutal policies of reoccupation of Gaza and the West Bank, policies that have since intensified in Gaza as a preliminary to the planned withdrawal which may or may not take place. Try doing the figures. They don't add up. Two years later, at the 150,000-strong demonstration in support of the Gaza pullout plan in May 2004, not one criticism was voiced of the army's destruction of Rafah that was going on at the same time, nor, by prior agreement, was anyone refusing to serve in the army allowed to speak: " 'Something must be done' always goes in two directions," writes poet Yitzhak Laor. "The first leads to the demonstration square (and then back home). The second leads to the military operation that has just won ecstatic support."⁵⁹ As if catastrophic exultation, alongside the desire for a resolution to the conflict, had worked itself into the national mind. To which must be added the fact that the pullout is likely to precipitate anything but peace, given that it is attached to the

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unilateral annexation of roughly 50 percent of the West Bank. We are, wrote Uri Avnery—former Knesset member, now one of Israel’s most vocal critics—in one of his *Gush-Shalom* dispatches, a schizophrenic country.⁶⁰ There must be violence. There must be peace. As a phrase, “the cycle of violence”—to use one of the clichés of the region—might be more apt than we think. How on earth can you stop something whose meaning stretches back through the annals of history and forward to the ends of time?

Like an individual in thrall to his passion, his perversity, and his symptom, a nation can be both self-defeating and unerring in its aim. But if it is relatively easy to acknowledge this of individuals, it is far more shocking to consider that a nation, apparently inspired, believing fervently in its own goodness in the world, might be devoted not only to the destruction of others but to sabotaging itself. Of nations, writes Rebecca West in the epigraph to this book, the pretense is still made that man is an animal who pursues pleasure and avoids pain. We find it hard to believe that in the heart of a nation there could be a kind of fighting that will not let it sleep, or that might hatchet its universe to ruin. For Scholem, reviving the most demonic components of the Jewish mystical tradition to which he devoted his life’s work, something difficult and often bitter had been silenced. It needed to be invoked once more—he wrote his study in the 1940s in Jerusalem when all around him the national future of the Jews was taking shape—for the contemporary state of the Jewish people to be understood. Can Israel live a life that is “not ideal, not demonic”?—the question of writer David Grossman, also

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writing out of Jerusalem half a century later, more or less in despair.⁶¹

One of Scholem's main tasks is to demonstrate the way that Jewish mysticism, notably in the Lurianic version which directly precedes the life and times of Shabtai Zvi, carries the seeds of what was historically to come. He is struggling to show that mysticism plays its part in the evolution of the Jewish people as more than a strange aberrant form of thought. If the Lurianic Kabbalah, developed in Safed in the middle of the sixteenth century, is crucial, it is because it was through its influence that Jewish mysticism became part of the general, public, consciousness of Jewish life. Lurianism was mythological, a rendering of divine acts and events that translate effortlessly into the sphere of history. Thus it was central to Lurianic mysticism that God could manifest himself only because he had first withdrawn or contracted himself.⁶² Right inside the spiritual process, we find a perfect analogy for exile: God becomes, like his chosen people, "an exile into Himself."⁶³ According to the Talmud, wherever Israel is exiled, the divine source or Shekinah goes with it. In Lurianic kabbalism, man has been in exile ever since the "breaking of the vessels," when the supernal light emanating from the divine source shattered the vessels waiting to contain it. Whereupon fragments, together with the divine sparks attached to them, were released into primordial space. From that point on, nothing was in its rightful and appointed place. The world is out of joint. The task of restitution or *tikkun*, of gathering the scattered fragments, then falls to man.

With the "breaking of the vessels," writes Scholem, "the historical notion of exile had become a cosmic sym-

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bol.”⁶⁴ This makes historic destitution supremely meaningful, lifts tragedy out of the dust. The perfect philosophy of exile, messianism allows the Jews to view themselves, not as historical indigents and ciphers, but as a major force in history.⁶⁵ For a generation in exile, whose precarious existence was a “most pressing and cruel problem,” it was the perfect answer.⁶⁶ Exile and redemption were illuminated, and the “unique historical situation of Israel” becomes symbolic of “the state of creation as a whole.”⁶⁷ Palestine is elevated to cosmic stature: “What we have come to find in Palestine,” writes Aaron David Gordon, whose writings set the tone for a whole early generation of Labor Zionists and from whom my opening epigraph for this chapter is taken, “is the cosmic element.” (Hertzberg describes Gordon as Labor Zionism’s “secular mystic and saint.”)⁶⁸ Fueled by the historic needs of the Jewish people, on the verge of seizing its own patch of ground, Zionism raises itself to the heavens: “The anticipation of redemption is the force which keeps exilic Judaism alive, and the Judaism of the land of Israel is salvation itself”—the words of Abraham Isaac Kook, first chief rabbi of Palestine, mentor of Israel’s redemptive-religious wing, and inspiration for many Israelis today.⁶⁹

According to kabbalistic legend, Adam—whose task was that of the first redeemer—had failed. Tearing asunder what was already joined, he had “destroyed the plantations.”⁷⁰ The land must therefore be restored—we can already see here a glimpse of Israel’s mythos of redeeming, planting, the earth. When the Messiah comes and the Jews arrive in Palestine, the whole cosmos, not just Israel, will therefore be set to rights. “The exile of

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