

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Naso 5769

Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying, so shall you bless the children of Israel, say to them... (6:23)

Rabbi Yaakov Sasportas (1610-1698) received a halachic inquiry from a Jewish community that had always followed the practice of saying Birkas Kohanim only on Yom Tov. But Shabbesai Tzvi, the false messiah, had come to town and started the practice of saying Birkas Kohanim every Shabbos. When the false messiah became an apostate and his movement was recognized by most Jews as wicked and heretical, the community wanted to know if they should now revert to their old practice of Birkas Kohanim only on Yom Tov. Rabbi Sasportas replied that indeed, the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim is very great and it is very good to say it every week, even every day. Chazal say that during exile, every day's curses will be worse than those of another day (Yalkut on Devarim 28:67), and the only antidote to this is to have the blessing of Birkas Kohanim every day. But we have a rule: "A good thing comes about through a good person and a bad thing through a bad person" (Shabbos 32a). The heretic Shabbesai Tzvi, he says, was not merely a bad person but a "meisis" (inciter to idolatry), regarding whom the Torah says, "Do not have mercy on him or cover up for him" (Devarim 13:9). Certainly, then, it is not proper that a mitzvah should be started by him. The practice must be discontinued (Responsa Ohel Yaakov 70).

Rabbi Sasportas published a book called Tzitz Novel Tzvi about the Sabbatean movement and his reaction against it. The book has been republished many times in an abridged form, called Kitzur Tzitz Novel Tzvi. Reading this book, we notice some similarities between Sabbateanism and Zionism, and from Rabbi Sasportas's reaction we can learn what our reaction should be today.

For example, he writes (p. 37a) of a certain follower of Shabbesai Tzvi, "How could he have had the audacity to claim that moshiach will go and ask the Turkish Sultan to set Israel free and make him king? This is wrong, for the redemption will not come through any man, but only through Hashem's hand, as it says, 'On that day I will raise up the fallen succah of David' (Amos 9:11). And in the dream of Nevuchadnetzar, 'a stone broke off, not by hands' (Daniel 2:34), which meant that 'the G-d of Heaven will establish a kingdom that will never be destroyed' (v. 44). So how could it happen through the Turkish Sultan?"

In a letter of advice to a rabbi who was attempting to convince his community not to join the Sabbateans (p. 50b), he writes: "In general, you should warn them not to force the end of exile and not to violate the oaths written in Shir Hashirim (2:7) 'not to arouse or awaken the love before it is desired.' Remind them of history, of past generations who erred in following false messiahs and prophets. In cases where danger is likely, we must not rely on miracles! This is especially true of the western communities, whose exile is much more difficult due to the oppressive governments they live under. They must lend their shoulder to bear the yoke of exile, and wait for their redeemer, though he may tarry. They must hope and hope again, for he will surely come and not delay. And in reward for their hoping, the redemption will come sooner, as Chazal say, 'Israel has no merit but hoping. They are worth redeeming in reward for the waiting' (Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim 736)."

Rabbi Sasportas also prints a letter by the rabbis of Venice, bemoaning the fact that their community strayed after Shabbesai Tzvi: “Who does not understand the acts of Hashem? The justice of Hashem is true and right, measure for measure. Because our community did not keep the oath not to arouse or awaken the love, we were punished with anger and powerful hatred that is aroused against us among the gentiles in all places.”

The similarities are striking. Zionism, too, claims to launch the messianic era through human effort. Zionism, too, instead of arousing love, has aroused hatred against Jews among nations all over the world. But with Zionism, everything is unfortunately on a much larger scale than with Sabbateanism.

The Rambam writes at the end of Iggeres Teiman: “And these are things the prophets have already foretold, and they have told us about what I have told you, that when the time of the true moshiach draws near, there will be many who lift themselves high and place doubts in people's minds, but their claims will not be born out, and they will perish and many will perish with them. And when Shlomo, peace be upon him, made known with his holy inspiration, that this nation when it is sunk into exile will try to arouse itself not at its proper time, and they will die because of this and travails will come upon them – he warned against this, and made an oath against this in an allegorical way, and said, ‘I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem...’ And you, our brethren, our beloved – keep his oath and do not arouse the love before it is desired!”

Although the Rambam wrote Igeres Teiman against a particular false messiah, in retrospect we see that that false messiah did not get very far, neither did any other false messiah in Jewish history. Even the Sabbatean movement’s spread among a large part of the Jewish people lasted less than a year; after that it was a mostly undercover, shunned heresy. The warning of Shlomo Hamelech was clearly referring to the by far most successful false messianic movement in Jewish history: Zionism.

We must listen to the Rambam carefully – he is talking to us! “Shlomo, peace be upon him, made known with his holy inspiration, that this nation when it is sunk into exile will try to arouse itself not at its proper time, and they will die because of this and travails will come upon them – he warned against this.” When else in Jewish history can it be said that the nation as a whole “tried to arouse itself not at its proper time”? If Zionism is not the very thing foreseen by Shlomo Hamelech, then what was?

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