

My friends, I am sure at least some of you will be surprised to learn that the Messiah came today. I hope it goes without saying that I am not referring to Jesus of Nazareth. It is well known that Christians accepted him as the Messiah, and it is equally well known that Jews have not, so I trust I am not bruising anyone's feelings here. Further, Jews and Christians alike know that Jesus of Nazareth lived some two thousand years ago, so as long as I make it clear that I am not referring to his return, it is clear I do not mean Jesus of Nazareth when I say the Messiah came today.

This is an opportunity to make clear that Jews and Christians are talking about two different concepts when we use the word messiah. In Judaism, a messiah—and there were many, both animate and inanimate—was someone or something on which a special mixture of olive oil and spices had been poured to indicate that particular object or person was set aside, or in other words, made holy for the service of God. **The Messiah** was simply whomever happened to be the King of Israel when the world attained a state of universal peace and universal acceptance of the God of Israel as the one true God, to mention the two main features of the Messianic Era.

Christians expanded this simple concept. The Messiah is part of a triune God, and was therefore God in human form. He was born to a virgin mother with child by the holy spirit, and was sent to die for the sins of humanity. Recognizing that we never achieved the Messianic Era, part of Christian theology calls for a second coming of the Messiah. The part of the Lubavitch Chassidic movement who believed the last Rebbe was the Messiah despite obvious problems with the Biblical definition (he was never King of Israel, nor does Israel have a monarchy today), when he passed away without the world attaining the Messianic ideals, they

too claimed there would be a second coming. It is only fair to stress that only about half of Lubavitchers believed that their rebbe was the Messiah.

But back to the big news! The Messiah came today! Where was Fox News? Where was CNN? Where was the Jerusalem Post? Where was Katie Couric, whose mother is Jewish and who my wife tells me had a lovely interview with Howard Stern? For that matter, if the Messiah came today, where was Howard Stern, asking the Messiah to save the world live onstage at America's Got Talent?

Well, my friends, there two pieces of bad news. One, the Messiah did come today, but it was 348 years ago, in 1665. And two, to paraphrase a classic Jewish joke, by him he was the Messiah, by his followers he was the Messiah, but by the Messiah, he was no Messiah. He converted to Islam in 1666.

By now, some of you are figuring me out. On 22 Sivan, 1665, Shabbatai Tvi proclaimed himself the Jewish Messiah. About one year later, given the choice between conversion to Islam or death by torture, he chose conversion. His story is one that should not be forgotten.

The timing of his messianic claim came immediately after the Chmielnitzki Massacres, which took place almost exactly 300 years before the Holocaust. Chmielnitzki was a Cossack whose hatred of Jews was second to no one's. Not only did he murder over 100,000 Jews at a time when the Jewish population was approximately 1.5 million, but the methods were extraordinarily cruel. A famous, first hand account survives, but I have opted not to read it tonight in favor of keeping my pulpit.

These horrific massacres led many observant Jews to believe the coming of the Messiah was at hand, just as some do today. Shabbatai Tzvi was at the right place at the right time. He was, however, most likely bi-polar. A normal person he wasn't. He married two women, but neither marriage was consummated and ended in divorce. He married a Torah Scroll, and don't dare ask the question you are wondering about; I don't know. He pronounced the name of God only pronounced by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, a considerable feat given that we do not know the pronunciation of that name. He played with the liturgy, turning the blessing over God releasing the captives (*matir assurim*) into *matir issurim*, God permits the forbidden, which led to a particularly sleazy follower to organize orgies, supposedly as a form of worship.

Shabbatai Tvi and Nathan, his scribe, had the Jews convinced that he would demand and receive Palestine back from Muslim control. When he made his demand, he received the choice I mentioned earlier. He chose to become a Muslim. The resulting devastation shook the Jewish world.

Three times there were Jews who thought the Messiah had come. The followers of Jesus thought so, but by the seventeenth century Jesus was well established as the spiritual father of Christianity. Rabbi Akiba proclaimed Shimon bar Kosiba, or bar Kochba as the Messiah, but the revolt he led against the Romans led to disaster for the Jewish people. And now Shabbatai Tzvi was a failure as well. Some could not believe it, insisting that the Shabbatai Tzvi imprisoned in Turkey was a fake, and the real one had been taken up to heaven alive, to return someday.

One ramification of the Shabbatai Tzvi debacle was the driving of the more spiritual and mystical sides of Judaism to the peripheries of Jewish life, or even

underground. They would not reemerge until the Chassidic movement of the eighteenth century. And it all began on the twenty-second day of Sivan 5423.

Tomorrow will be a memorable day for the Jewish people as well. *Zahava Aliza bat Tanchum Benyamin v'Elisheva* will be called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah. I can't promise Jews will be talking about it 348 years from now. On the other hand, that might be just fine.