

**R. Joseph della Reina
and his Damnation in the Fiction of I. B. Singer**

**Kelly Scott Johnson
Department of Jewish Studies
McGill University, Montreal**

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I. Abstract

The following thesis focuses on the medieval kabbalistic legend of R. Joseph della Reina who, using traditions of esoteric magic, conjured Satan in order to slaughter him in an unsuccessful bid to force the Redemption of Israel. A translation of a version from eighteenth century Amsterdam is presented. Influenced by the heretical ideas of Sabbatianism, this version carries two opposing significations: that of a cautionary tale on one hand, that of a tragic tale of mystical heroism on the other. Based on evidence from the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the case is made that the modern author, in line with his philosophy of political passivism and historical pessimism, makes full use of the Faustian fascination of R. Joseph della Reina's fearsome story while repeatedly presenting the legend in such a way as to purge it of traditional ambiguity, undermine its tragic character, and leave behind only the aspect of caution or warning.

Le sujet de la thèse concerne la légende cabalistique médiévale de Joseph de la Reina, qui, en faisant appel aux traditions ésotérique de magie, essaie sans succès de faire porter la rédemption de l'Israël, en conjurant Satan. On présente une traduction d'une version hollandaise de la XVIIIe siècle. Cette version est influencée par les idées hérétiques du sabbatianisme. En plus, elle présente deux significations opposantes: d'une part, celle d'un conte avertisseur, et d'autre part, d'un conte tragique qui reconnaisse l'héroïsme mystique. La présente thèse vise à établir un lien entre la fiction de l'écrivain Isaac Bashevis Singer et la légende de Joseph de la Reina. En rapport avec ses pensées politiques passivistes et son pessimisme historique, Bashevis utilise la fascination faustienne qui émerge de l'histoire effrayant de Joseph de la Reina. En même temps, Bashevis, en présentant l'histoire selon sa propre manière, débarrasse de toute l'ambiguïté attachée au conte. Cette thèse veut montrer que Bashevis sape le caractère tragique du conte en retenant seulement les aspects d'avertissement et de prudence.

**II. R. Solomon ben Jacob Ayllon's *R. Joseph Dolphina*--
a translation from the Western Yiddish version of
R. Leyb ben Oyzer: Amsterdam, 1711¹**

Now I must also relate to you the fearsome and terrible story which that man of God, Rabbi Isaac Luria, once revealed to his students. For it is written in the *Book of Transmigrations* how a black dog came running straight up to Rabbi Isaac Luria. So he said to his students, "The soul of Rabbi Joseph Dolphina² has been reincarnated in this black dog and seeks rectification from me for an episode that happened in his past life." So much is written in the *Book of Transmigrations*. And the episode is not mentioned at all.

But Rabbi Isaac Luria told the episode to his students. He certainly knew it through divine inspiration for it is known what a holy man he was. I received the story from the great Gaon, our teacher and master Rabbi Solomon Ayllon, chief judge of the holy Sephardic community in Amsterdam written in the sacred tongue. And the tale is thus:

A pious man lived in the Holy Land, in the city of Hebron, may it soon be rebuilt and restored. This same man was a distinguished scholar of the Law well versed in Torah and in the ways of piety. And this pious man had delved very deeply into and learned the true wisdom, the wisdom of the Kabbalah. And in his time were found manuscripts of the Holy Book of the Zohar, which had just been revealed in the world at this time. And this pious man Rabbi Joseph took great joy in the Zohar.

And he sought out for himself companions distinguished in the Law and in the ways of piety, ten great scholars. And they all studied Kabbalah day and night. And they

performed great mortifications of the flesh such as cannot be described. But this R. Joseph far surpassed all the others, for all his days he fasted and practiced great seclusion. And when his companions left him, he locked himself forthwith in a chamber of seclusion and prayed great prayers with great intention. These things he did every day:

At night he lay on the bare ground, rolled in ashes and he cried and lamented with great cries over the destruction of the Holy Temple. He did this for a long time until Elijah the Prophet revealed himself to him and taught him a great many secrets and passed on to him numerous combinations of the Holy Names. For Elijah, of blessed memory, came to him every day. Finally he began to pray great prayers and to weep and cry every day that God reveal to him the End of Days and soon send us the Righteous Redeemer to gather the banished of Israel.³

And from this same time on and after, Elijah the Prophet disappeared and no longer appeared to him. Just when this R. Joseph saw that Elijah came to him no more he was greatly grieved and cried out in prayer and in supplication, and performed great mortifications of the flesh, fasts and ritual immersions and suffered great afflictions for forty days in succession and cried out continuously, "Elijah, Elijah where are you? Where are you staying? Why don't you show yourself to me?"

Just when these forty days came to an end, Elijah the Prophet came to him and said, "You stinking drop⁴, dust and ashes. Why did you shake the upper and lower worlds with your prayers? Don't you know that no son of man has ever had this thing revealed to him, not even the Holy Prophets? And how many sages, pious men and holy men prayed for this thing but accomplished nothing. Therefore, let these matters be for

these are secrets and hidden matters which are revealed to no one. You will accomplish nothing with all your weeping and crying.

When the pious man heard this from Elijah he began to cry out in a miserable cry and said, "I will not let you leave me until you tell me what I wish to ask you." And he began to put an oath on him in the great and awesome Name that he should not go from him until he told him the thing he asks. This is the thing which he wanted Elijah to tell him, what actions he should take in order to hasten the Redemption and eliminate the impurity, the husks of evil and accusing angels from the world.

Here Elijah answered and said, "In heaven they have heard your weeping and crying and your fervent prayers, therefore I will tell all that I have permission to tell to you. If you are determined to take an action then you must go with your companions, the righteous men, to the Mountains of Darkness using these Holy Names that I will pass on to you. There you will find a completely black dog, very black, extraordinarily so. But you must be very, very cautious not to let him lead you astray in any matter."

"And here I pass on to you a chain upon which is engraved the Tetragrammaton, Y"H,⁵ the Lord of Hosts. And here I give you pure frankincense from which you should smell; it is from the eleven herbs that were used for the Temple incense, so you will have power to withstand the terrible stench of the black dog, for this is Samael. At that moment you must pray with great intent the prayers that I now give you. And this chain with the Tetragrammaton you should throw on the black dog, then he will be caught and bound and thereupon you must all slaughter him forthwith, without hesitating at all.

"And I will be with you to guide you on the way to the Mountains of Darkness where you should go when you have done all these things. And how you should conduct

yourselves afterwards, I will teach you. But this I tell you one more time, guard yourselves and guard yourselves very, very well against the Black dog, that he does not deceive you in anything. Be warned and warned again in that you bind him forthwith with this chain and slaughter him forthwith without any mercy in the world, and give in to him in nothing so he cannot deceive you.

This is the same which I was given permission to tell you and nothing more:

And so Elijah passed on to this R. Joseph the Holy Names, *yihudim*⁶ and combinations of Holy Names that they must meditate on and combine to do this thing, and Elijah the Prophet disappeared from him:

And this pious man, R. Joseph, was very happy and jubilant, and he then went to his companions, the righteous men and told these things to his companions, everything that Elijah the Prophet had said and showed his companions the chain and the pure frankincense that he had given him. When they saw this they believed him and were overjoyed that they should have the privilege to conquer Samael and to hasten the Redemption. And they all prepared themselves forthwith with holiness and purity and awe and reverence to combine the Holy Names and *yihudim*.

And as soon as they combined the Holy Names as Elijah had taught them, they were in the Mountains of Darkness forthwith. And they found the Black dog there forthwith as Elijah the Prophet had said. So they threw the chain with the Tetragrammaton on him forthwith and bound him with great cruelty.

And this Black dog wept and cried out before them and he pleaded that they should have mercy on him and let him go. But they paid no heed to all his crying and pleading and handled him with very great cruelty. But he would not let up and he cried

and pleaded to them, but they took him with cruel force to slaughter him and engrossed themselves in all the *yihudim* and Holy Names that Elijah had taught them.

Now when the Black dog saw that all his weeping and lamenting didn't help and that they would not have mercy on him, then he tried a different trick and said to this R. Joseph, "I am in your power, do with me as you please", and he held still and the pious men were intent on their combinations of the Holy Names in order to slaughter him.

A moment later he said, "Before my death at least allow me to smell a little bit of the pure frankincense."

And because they were preoccupied and confused they handed him the pure frankincense to smell. In the same instant the Black dog stood up on his feet and began, "Lord of the Universe! You have written in your Torah, 'You shall have no other gods before me nor shall you serve them', and these people have worshipped me, have burned their incense for me, their pure frankincense.

Thus he instantly had great strength to break the chain and to tear it into many pieces and he threw these righteous men far, far away; some to the mountains and hills and some to the desert and each completely alone, not one with the others. But each alone helped himself with the Holy Names and *yihudim* that they all knew well. After this each of them came to light in a place of human habitation, but some of them died the very same year, and some lost their minds, and some returned to the Holy Land and studied as before but never revealed this to anyone in the world but no longer took such paths and absolutely did not pursue such matters anymore.

And this R. Joseph was flung far away onto a mountain close to the Kingdom of France and became completely insane. Thus in one day he came to the Land of France.

Then he went to a place not far from the place where lived the King. There many Jews lived but no Jew could recognize him, but they could see that he was an important man and a distinguished scholar of the Law and great master of Kabbalah but insane.

So the Jews there made provision for him from which he could live and settled him in a house near the city and provided him with some sacred books which he required. Thus he stayed in the same house some months and studied.

After this he began to do fantastic things by means of Holy Names and he remembered many, many names. And he performed many conspicuous fantastic deeds that we cannot describe here.

He also conjured angels that they must [bring]⁷ him Queen Dolphina who was a great beauty and the King of France was her husband. They brought her to him each night in his house, in his bed and he laid with her. And the Queen fell into a great fear because she knew that she had been forcefully carried her off, but she saw neither man nor beast in the world who carried or led her until she came to the bed of this R. Joseph. She saw him as he always laid with her, therefore a great terror and confusion came over her for she could not know how she came there so that she could not utter a word for fear. And in the morning near dawn she would be carried back to her house. This he did for two months that every night he had the Queen Dolphina brought to him through names, therefore he is called R. Joseph Dolphina according to the name of the Queen.

So the Queen finally went to the King and told him everything that had happened to her. The King was terrified and spoke to the Queen, "you should know well the countenance of the man to whom you are brought each night." And the Queen spoke, "Yes my Lord King. If that man should come before us I (would) know him very well

and his countenance is such and such.” And she described to him all his features, how he is.

So the King used all investigations and enquiries available to such a royal personage to investigate everything. Finally it was brought to light that this same man is this R. Joseph, who lived near the city for enough had been rumored about his fantastic deeds which he had done and his countenance matched what the Queen had said.

Then the King of France sent messengers to this R. Joseph that they should bring him to the King forthwith. When these messengers came to R. Joseph’s house they looked for him but could not find him and he cried out to them, “What do you want from me? Here I am. Go to the King and tell him I have no desire to see his face and I do not wish to come to him. If he has something to say, let him send a message through you.”

The messengers said, “Where are you? Let us see you,” for they heard a voice but saw no one at all.

And he said, “Go off to your King and tell what I have told you to say for you are powerless over me.”

And the King’s messengers were very terrified and amazed by this thing and went to the King and told him everything that had happened with them and what he offered the King and they told the King that this man was a Jew. As soon as the King heard this he sent word to the Jews and they were ordered that they should bring this R. Joseph before him. They must present him to the King.

This was a troubled time for the Jews because they knew well that this R. Joseph can work many things with Holy Names. They had great fear how they should bring him

before the King. And who could know what he might do before the King, possibly leading, heaven forbid, to an outbreak of persecution.

So the Jews sent word forthwith to this R. Joseph that he should know that he should not put all of Israel in such danger and that he should go before the King and not rebel against the King, and they would do their best through intercession with all possible means in their power to save him. And if he would not do this that he would be excommunicated in all synagogues and houses of study with the blowing of the shofars and with Holy Names. And all his actions will not be able to help him.

When this R. Joseph heard these things he realized he could not be saved, especially when he had the Jews against him. For he had no fear of the King, but he was powerless against the Jews. So he went out on a high mountain and threw himself down from it and died.

So they informed the King forthwith that he is dead and of how he was insane and had taken his own life in madness. So the King ordered forthwith that he should be buried with great honor for he had heard that he was once a great man and did all these things in madness. So the King was satisfied and the land was tranquil.⁸

Now my beloved masters, from this story we can see what power the *sitra ahra*⁹ has. That such pious men could not resist in their great piety and were ensnared in its realm and were stricken, and he was even reincarnated in a black dog. And R. Isaac Luria, of blessed memory, rectified this R. Joseph Dolphina. Such was revealed by R. Isaac Luria, of blessed memory, to his students, otherwise such a story would not have been revealed. Therefore one should not be surprised when one sees someone perform awesome deeds, it is all through the *sitra ahra* and one should keep far away from such

people as much as possible for they confuse and disrupt the world and much evil comes from them and absolutely nothing good. Also you must be wholeheartedly with your God.¹⁰ For we need no other prophets besides Elijah the Prophet may he return bearing good tidings of deliverance and consolation speedily in our days, Amen.

Notes

¹ R. Solomon ben Jacob Ayllon (1655-1728), Sephardi Rabbi of Amsterdam, wrote a Hebrew version of the R. Joseph della Reina legend. This version was translated into the local Yiddish by R. Leyb ben Oyzer, the sexton of the Ashkenazi synagougue in Amsterdam. R. Leyb ben Oyzer's Yiddish version of the legend along with his history of Shabbatai Zevi was published by Zalman Shazar in *Sipur ma'ase shabtai tsevi*. My translation is based on the Shazar edition of R. Leyb's manuscript. An English translation of what most definitely appears to be the Ayllon version has recently come to my attention. This version was first published in Hebrew by Micha Joseph bin-Gorion (Berdichevsky) in his collection *Mimekor yisrael*; it was unknown to me at the time I translated the manuscript version as it appears in the Shazar edition. For comparison see *Mimekor Yisrael*, Vol. II (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), story number 272.

² The Spanish "della Reina", or "of the Queen", R. Joseph's epithet, is replaced in the R. Leyb ben Oyzer-Solomon Ayllon version with "Dolphina." The latter is a Yiddish adaptation of the French "Dauphine" used to designate the Queens of absolutist France. Further on the legend explains why the name permanently attached itself to R. Joseph. R. Leib ben Ozer, *Sipur ma'ase shabtai tsevi/Beshraybung fun Shabse Tsvi*. Ed. Zalman Shazar (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1978), 206n.

³ R. Leyb ben Oyzer here quotes the Hebrew of Isaiah 11:12.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 3:1. Know whence you came, whither you are going, and before whom you are going to have to give a full account of yourself. From whence do you come? -- from a putrid drop [*mittippah serukhah*]. Whither are you going? -- to a place of dust, worms and maggots. And before whom are you going to give a full account of yourself? -- before the King of king of kings, the Holy One, the blessed.

⁵ The Hebrew letters "Yod" "He" are an abbreviated form of the Tetragrammaton.

⁶ According to Gershom Scholem *yihudim* ("acts of unification") were Lurianic "meditations on one of the letter combinations of the Tetragrammaton, or on configurations of such names with different vocalizations, such as Isaac Luria was in the habit of giving to his disciples, 'to each in accordance with the root of his soul'". Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset, 1974), 179. Moshe Idel emphasizes the magical and theurgical nature of *yihudim*. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 186.

⁷ Translator's emendation of R. Leyb ben Oyzer's text as in found in Shazar edition.

⁸ R. Leyb ben Oyzer uses the Hebrew phrase "and the land was tranquil" found in Judges 3:11, 5:31, 8:28, 3:30.

⁹ Scholem defines *sitra ahra* (literally "the other side") as "the domain of dark emanations and demonic powers." Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 123.

¹⁰ A Hebrew phrase taken from Deut. 18:13.

III. Historical Notes on R. Solomon Ayllon's "R. Joseph Dolphina"

The legend of R. Joseph della Reina is rooted in the rumored magical career of a Spanish Kabbalist in fifteenth century Spain about whose life virtually nothing is known.

Although R. Joseph's historical profile is nearly non-existent,¹ his legendary reincarnations are legion. They have appeared in such key periods in Jewish history as the kabbalistic renaissance of Safed in the sixteenth century, the dynamic Jewish culture of the Dutch Republic in the early modern period (from which comes the translation above), and the great flowering of Yiddish literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the subject of the second part of the thesis). Indeed the mystics resident in the mountain town of Safed today continue to see the reincarnated soul of R. Joseph della Reina in black graveyard cats which happen to cross the path of a guided tour.

The following brief introduction to this enduring legend will trace the historical and conceptual trends which informed and helped shape it, in hopes of providing the necessary background for understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer's frequent use of the tale in the context of modern Yiddish high literature. Influences which helped shape the legend of R. Joseph della Reina are many and varied. They include ancient Jewish magical practice, the foundations of Kabbalah proper in medieval Spain, the kabbalistic bible the Zohar and the development of Lurianic Kabbalah. The chapter will finish with a somewhat more detailed look at the world of the Sabbatian heresy which helped give birth to Solomon Ayllon's version above. In this last section structural similarities between the Sabbatian heretical interpretation of the messianic drama and classical Greek

tragedy will be compared in light of R. Joseph's "fearsome" tale. The remarkable scholarship of Gershom Scholem has been the key to accessing at least one, specifically historical explanation for the mystery of R. Joseph's ongoing narrative appeal. Moshe Idel's equally remarkable "phenomenological" work in the field of Jewish mysticism has provided both a critical alternative and complement to Scholem's historicist analysis. Finally, Paul Ricoeur's concise description of Greek tragedy has provided literary insights into the legend which open the door to the second part of the thesis dealing with the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Mystical traditions informing kabbalistic legends such as that of R. Joseph della Reina carry both the seeds of radicalism and extreme conservatism, activism and quietism. This "creative tension"² intrinsic to the kabbalistic tradition represents an important aspect of the legend of R. Joseph della Reina which Gershom Scholem has called "a grand allegory on all 'pressing for the End.'"³ Depending on the disposition of any particular mystical consciousness in any particular historical moment, one aspect or the other might be emphasized in interpretation or rendition. R. Joseph's failure, his fall into insanity, sin and suicide stand in contrast with and balance out the same R. Joseph's ascetic piety, holiness of redemptive intention, mystico-magical acumen and heroic self-sacrifice.

Throughout the history of Jewish mysticism esoteric interests were consistently challenged by various forms of *aggadic* and *halakhic* limitation. These came in the form of warnings concerning personal and national dangers involved in such matters. One influential example of such a warning is found in a famous talmudic commentary on Song of Songs 2:7: "I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and by the

hinds of the field, do not awaken or stir up love until it is ready.” Rabbi Helbo comments: ‘Four vows are contained here. The Israelites are adjured not to revolt against the kingdoms of the world....not to press for the End, not to reveal their mystery to the nations of the world, and not to come up from exile like a wall... But if so, why does King Messiah come? To gather in the exiled of Israel.’”⁴

R. Joseph della Reina’s legend played an important role in such stratagems of limitation, yet it guards the messianic tradition Janus-faced as both a warning against mystico-magical abuses and as a testament to the great hidden powers and potentialities of kabbalistic magic. The ominous shadow of warning hanging over the legend can be interpreted as an attempt to control the legend’s most basic idea: namely that of forcing the redemption in one fell, magical swoop. As is the case with Leyb ben Oyzer’s translation above which was originally included as an appendix to his Yiddish biography of the mystical heretic Sabbatai Zevi, messianic conservatives⁵ within the mystical community often used the legend as a sort of precautionary post-script when they set out to describe various manifestations of mystical assertiveness. At the same time those more obsessed with eschatological agendas could use the legend to keep the messianic possibility alive in the minds of the people while, because of the association of the legend with warning, warding off potential accusations from the side of messianic conservatives.⁶ Indeed the intriguing question whether R. Leyb b. Oyzer’s motivation for translating R. Joseph’s legend was conservative or radical remains open.

In any case, many of the warnings associated with the legend came as a response to the perceived danger intrinsic to the mystico-magical practice fundamental to esoteric strategies of redemptive activism. Gershom Scholem grants the legend of R. Joseph della

Reina very important status in this legacy of kabbalistic magic or “practical Kabbalah.” The latter must be distinguished from “theoretical” or “speculative” Kabbalah which, as the names indicate, emphasized esoteric theory and internal experience of the divine in contrast to the magical manipulation of the physical or historical realm. Gershom Scholem never divorced magic from the traditions of Kabbalah proper. In the following passage Scholem comments on the relative lateness of the distinction between theoretical and practical Kabbalah and on how the latter has remained an integral part of the kabbalistic heritage up to the present:

...as a result of the contact with medieval Jewish philosophy, the Kabbalah became a Jewish “mystical theology,” more or less systematically elaborated. This process brought about a separation of the mystical, speculative elements from the occult and especially the magical elements, a divergence that at times was quite distinct but was never total. It is expressed in the separate usage of the terms *Kabbalah iyyunit* (“speculative Kabbalah”) and *Kabbalah ma'asit* (“practical kabbalah”), evident from the beginning of the 14th century – which was simply an imitation of Maimonides’ division of philosophy into “speculative” and “practical” in chapter 14 of his *Millot ha-Higgayon*. There is no doubt that some kabbalistic circles (including those in Jerusalem up to modern times) preserved both elements in their secret doctrine, which could be acquired by means of revelation or by way of initiation rites.⁷

Scholem includes magic practice as an important constituent of the kabbalistic heritage, the categorical split between theoretical and practical Kabbalah only coming late under the influence of Platonic dualistic idealism in medieval Jewish philosophy. Scholem attests to the centrality of R. Joseph della Reina elsewhere as he includes his name in a list of seminal personalities within this kabbalistic magical tradition: “Among the great masters of practical Kabbalah in the eyes of kabbalistic tradition itself were

figures like Judah he-Hasid, Joseph Gikatilla, Isaac of Acre, Joseph della Reina, Samson of Ostropol, and Joel Ba'al Shem Tov."⁸ That kabbalists of such "theoretical" sophistication were also deeply involved with "practical" Kabbalah supports Scholem's view that magic should be included as a part of Kabbalah proper.⁹

Moshe Idel has also tied magic into the knot of Kabbalah proper by focussing on the humanistic and activist implications of both theoretical and practical Kabbalah. According to Idel this activist impulse is a phenomenon which dates back to the earliest foundational layers of the Jewish mystical heritage:

The ecstatic of the Heikhalot literature had to undergo an experience in which he transcended the mundane world and penetrated perilous domain, ruled by dangerous angels who might indeed kill him. This spiritual journey was attributed not only to such tannaitic figures as R. 'Akiva and R. Ishmael but also to Moses, who was portrayed as a Heikhalot mystic ascending on high to receive the Torah. He had to overcome the enmity of seven dreadful angels and to controvert them; only then could he proceed victoriously to receive the Torah. Accordingly, ancient Jewish mysticism encompassed ecstasy and activism: both were necessary for the fulfillment of the highest goal.¹⁰

Idel goes on to link these early examples of mystical activism with the natural magic of Yohanan Alemanno, a trend "congenial to the contemporary Renaissance thought," and to R. Joseph della Reina's quite different magical trajectory which focussed on "demonology and coercive incantations." Thus for both Scholem and Idel, R. Joseph

della Reina's heritage of magical manipulation of the mundane world was one particular manifestation of Kabbalah, yet fully kabbalistic nonetheless.

A tool of kabbalistic magic important to the legend is name-invocation, or the use of angelic (good or evil) names and the sacred name or names of God to produce changes in the sublunary world through spiritual manipulation. According to *Pesikta Rabbati* chapter 21:104a, the "name of God creates and destroys worlds."¹⁰ It is to the mastery of these names which R. Joseph della Reina aspires in the legend. In his "fallen" state at the end of the story, R. Joseph displays his mastery of more mundane forms of magic when he uses them to abduct the Queen of France. In his previous, righteously ambitious phase, however, he enters the Mountains of Darkness fully confident that the sacred names hold a power sufficiently strong to back up his redemptive audacity.

R. Joseph della Reina's belief in the timeliness of his messianic mission found support in the nature of the donor of these mystico-magical names, the Prophet Elijah. The kabbalists, precariously hung between the conservative and revolutionary nature of their mystical practice described shortly above,¹¹ legitimized their innovations to tradition by linking them to *gilluy eliyahu/gile elye* (the Revelation of the Prophet Elijah). Although these revelations were inferior to those of Moses or the Biblical Prophets proper, they were nonetheless authoritative. Significantly, Elijah the Prophet, R. Joseph della Reina's mentor in name-magic, was considered "the Messianic Guardian" from whom "it was impossible to suppose that he would ever reveal or communicate anything that was in fundamental contradiction with the tradition."¹² That such a one should have favored R. Joseph della Reina with puissant knowledge of the sacred names most certainly helped push him toward radical messianism.

Scholem comments further on one specific historical and ideational context which harbored the possibility of such a radically powerful use for esoteric name-magic. This context was that of Lurianic Kabbalah which put forth a new cosmology intimately tied to the “extreme mysticism of language and the Holy names in which the divine power is concentrated...”¹³:

Even orthodox Lurianism, though emphasizing the complexity and slow progress of the process of *tiqqun*¹⁴, admitted, as we have seen the possibility of bringing about the end and redemption with one stroke, that is, by one powerful and concentrated act of meditation (*kawwanah*) – provided that the generation was worthy. This idea was only marginal to the Lurianic system, and its source lay in popular legend rather than in speculative kabbalah. But it appealed to a number of kabbalists, and some even thought that by an act of “practical kabbalah,” that is, by the use of holy names and kabbalistic (magical) formulas, it would be possible to force the end.¹⁵

The “popular legend” Scholem has in mind here is most certainly that of R. Joseph della Reina. The double-edged nature of the legend helps explain its popularity among followers of Lurianic Kabbalah, a trend which uneasily juggled conservative and radical messianic conceptions. It also helps explain why the legend of R. Joseph della Reina accompanied the dissemination of Lurianic ideas from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries like a faithful black dog.¹⁶ As seen in Scholem’s quote above, Lurianic Kabbalah paradoxically passed on a seed of radical messianism which in large part contradicted its otherwise slow or moderate messianic ideology. The dominant Lurianic conception involved the restoration of *nitzotzot* (holy sparks of divine light) imprisoned by the *kelippot* (“shells, husks”; forces of evil) since creation when the “unity

and perfection” of the divine worlds was lost in a “primordial catastrophe” known as *shevirat ha-kelim* (the “breaking of the vessels” containing the divine light).¹⁷ This divine light was to be restored through the performance of *mizvot* (halakhic behavioral prescriptions) and *yihudim* (“exercises in meditation based on mental concentration on the combination of Sacred Names”).¹⁸

Lurianism represents a major trend in the history of Jewish mysticism that came, historically, in the wake of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and, theoretically, in that of zoharic Kabbalah. This mystical current arose out of a circle of mystics devoted to the teachings of R. Isaac Ashkenazi Luria (1534-1572) more reverently known as *Ha-Ari* -- the “sacred lion” taken from the initials *Ha-Elohi Rabbi Yizhak* “the divine Rabbi Isaac.”¹⁹ The kabbalistic school which developed around Luria devised a “pioneer conception of the theoretical aspect of Kabbalah”²⁰ while wedding these “striking concepts to the messianic idea.”²¹

Lurianic ideas represent a highly influential theological expression of the humanistic and activist impulse of theoretical and, especially, of practical Kabbalah. In bringing these impulses to the heart of kabbalistic thought and practice, Lurianic Kabbalah helped pave the way for a popularization²² of kabbalistic ideas which had up to this time remained the domain of a relatively small and exclusive mystical elite. Scholem interpreted the intensified interest in the messianic idea in Lurianic circles as a response to the historical disaster of the Spanish diaspora whose ideational ground had been prepared by messianic trends already extant within the Jewish esoteric tradition. The novel and dynamic response of Lurianism to disaster would have far-reaching repercussions in subsequent Jewish history.

Thus defined, Lurianism represents a very important link in Scholem's historicist interpretation of movements in the history of Kabbalah, an analysis which stipulates a direct causal connection between one major trend and its immediate predecessor. As Moshe Idel has noted, for Scholem "*Historia non facit saltus.*" Indeed history does not jump for the father of modern Kabbalah studies, and Idel concisely summarizes the master's scheme: "Lurianic Kabbalah therefore logically follows zoharic Kabbalah; Sabbatianism, the Lurianic school; and Hasidism, Sabbatianism."²³ Idel criticizes Scholem's historical determinism and, perhaps somewhat sarcastically, dubs Luria "Scholem's hero of the Kabbalistic interiorization of the Sephardic exodus."²⁴ Beyond questioning Scholem's historicist assumptions, Idel has accused the master's followers of perpetrating a "tacit ideology." He argues that the causal connections postulated by Scholem and his devotees are inadequately established. Idel himself propounds a "phenomenological" approach, replacing the emphasis on texts and key historical figures with a comparative analysis of concepts, systems and kabbalistic practice.²⁵

What is important in the context of the legend is the fact that alongside this Lurianic trend, and to a large extent within it, Scholem has placed magical Kabbalah – a "minor trend" to which, as has been seen, Idel granted importance as well.²⁶ Unlike the heady musings of Lurianic theogony, the realm of practical or magical Kabbalah finds its major emblem in the popular and relatively simple legend of R. Joseph della Reina. The legend is transmitted within a tradition of radical messianism that harbored the possibility of conjuring the messianic moment through that single, hyper-intense performance of kabbalistic magical rite as characterized by Scholem above.

On the popular level, the legend of R Joseph della Reina and its underlying message of radical messianism found resonance in the distinctive messianic traditions alive in socially diverse quarters of the Jewish community. In the passage which follows Scholem describes this popular receptivity to the messianic possibility, contrasting it with the relative neglect of the messianic subject by philosophers and theologians:

It is well known that the whole broad area of Messianic expectations which appear in the aggadic tradition and in the Midrashim was not deemed worthy of systematic treatment by the great Jewish philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages (with the sole exception of Saadia Gaon in the tenth century). Thus the popular imagination and the religious impulse were left free to dream their own dreams and think their own thoughts, without encountering the opposition of the enlightened part of the community. A whole popular literature grew up in the Middle Ages which prophesied the final apocalyptic war that would bring history to an end, and vividly pictured redemption as the crowning event in the national and communal saga. In this way, Messianic expectation, looked down upon by the intellectual aristocracy, struck roots among the masses of the people, diverting their minds from efforts to solve the problems of the present to the utopian realm of the "Day of the Lord."²⁷

Lurianism would weave itself increasingly into the fabric of this popular dream while the dream itself informed the Lurianic worldview. Although Luria wrote very little in his short life, his most important disciple Hayyim Vital recorded his teachings in the seminal *Ets Hayyim* (Tree of Life). A quick overview of the thematic outline of this book's eight *sha'arim* or "gates" reveals the extent to which Lurianic tradition underpins the post-Lurianic version of R. Joseph della Reina's legend translated above:

- A) all the material in Luria's hand collected by Vital.
- B) *Sha'ar ha-Derushim*, a systematic presentation of Luria's theosophical doctrine.

- C) *Sha'ar ha-Pesukim*, explanations of biblical passages, arranged in a sequence that follows the Bible.
- D) *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim*, the mystical doctrine of metempsychosis, *gilgul*.
- E) *Sha'ar ha-Kavannot*, on the mystical intentions and meditations required for prayer (*kavvanot ha-tefillah*).
- F) *Sha'ar ha-Mizvot*, the reasons for the religious precepts
- G) The doctrine of amends for sins (*tikkunei avonot*)
- H) Instructions for mystical “unifications” (*yihudim*) which Luria transmitted to each disciple individually.²⁸

Four of these gates show up explicitly in the legend. This is not surprising in light of the fact that both Hayyim Vital, Luria’s disciple, and Luria’s teacher Moses Cordovero penned early versions of the legend.²⁹ Gate “D” addresses the idea of reincarnation, a theme which manifests itself in the legendary “black dog” incarnation of R. Joseph della Reina’s fallen soul. Not surprisingly this was a motif which first appeared in Hayyim Vital’s earlier Lurianic version of the tale.³⁰ Gate “E” describes kabbalistic meditation and is mirrored in R. Joseph’s regimen of mystical prayer: “it was however this R. Joseph, who far surpassed his companions. Always fasting and seeking solitude, he would lock himself in a little room praying great and fervent prayers...” Gate “G” is mirrored in the redress R. Isaac Luria granted the soul trapped in the black dog. Finally, both the personal teaching style of R. Isaac and the quest for mystical “unification” dealt with in Gate “H” are clearly portrayed in the legend.

Accompanying and closely related to Lurianic influences on the legend are narrative features directly influenced by the Zohar, the central text of Jewish mystical thought whose appearance on the kabbalistic scene was interpreted as an important sign of immanent redemption. A quick look at this seminal classic in the kabbalistic canon reveals its importance to the legend of R. Joseph della Reina. The Zohar is a pseudo-

epigraphic work written by the Spanish Kabbalist Moses de Leon dating back to the last quarter of the thirteenth century. It was composed in an anachronistic and intentionally “obscure” Aramaic, a contrivance which effectively clothed De Leon’s “interpretation of Judaism in archaic garb” while limiting access to some of its more radical ideas.³¹ De Leon composed the book in the name of the important tannaitic scholar R. Simeon b. Yohai and his friends. Seeing it as their mystical Bible, kabbalists accepted and continue to accept its antiquity.

Scholem contends that the boldness of the Zohar’s conceptual framework and its “deepening and broadening” of kabbalistic symbolism served to “spread knowledge of the Kabbalah and ensure its acceptance.”³² Significantly, two later additions to the book, *Ra’aya Meheimna* and *Sefer ha-Tikkunim*, both composed by an unknown author and not De Leon himself, would self-referentially elevate “the importance of the Zohar as the final revelation of the mysteries...” Scholem goes on to say that “these two works connected its appearance with the beginning of the redemption: ‘Through the merits of the Zohar they will go forth from exile in mercy,’ i.e. without the dread pains of the redemption (Zohar 3:124b).”³³

Taking off from this idea, R. Leyb b. Oyzer’s version of the legend portrays R. Joseph della Reina encouraged in his redemptive activism by the “finding” of the Zohar: “This righteous man had gone deep into the wisdom of the Kabbalah. It was in his time that the writings of the Holy Zohar were found and revealed to the world. And this righteous man, R. Joseph, took great joy in the Zohar.” Such a conception created an ideational space in which a sudden, magico-mystical conjuring of redemption could legitimately exist, a fact which amplifies the Zohar’s significance to the legend of R.

Joseph della Reina. Yet even this radically innovative mystical text carried a dialectically conservative nature in line with esoteric phenomena in general.³⁴ It is most likely coincidental, but it is nonetheless interesting to note that the gloss *zohar* in biblical Hebrew holds an indeterminate meaning which hangs precariously between these two interpretive poles. Brown, Driver and Briggs in their dictionary of biblical Hebrew give the following definition of “*zohar*”: “...give light, enlighten, instruct, admonish; this possible, but not certain, meaning *shine* is late in Hebrew; usual sense as given below is not *enlighten, illumine* mentally, but *warn*...”³⁵

Indeed, darker elements of the legend quite possibly find parallels in zoharic imagery as well, images which would have well warranted precaution and warning. In the Zohar (3:208a, 212a-b) mention is made of “the sorcerer’s journey to ‘the mountains of darkness’ which are the abode of the rebel angels Aza and Azael, to study under their auspices (a Jewish version of the late-medieval idea of the ‘Sabbat’ of the witches and sorcerers).”³⁶ Scholem goes on to say that according to *Tikkunei Zohar* the use of such black arts was “considered justifiable under certain circumstances, inasmuch as the *sitra ahra* must be fought with its own weapons.”³⁷ Thus the strong motif of the “Mountains of Darkness” as found in R. Joseph’s legend does not merely find a symbolic predecessor in the Zohar and ancient folklore, but an image attended by the conflicts surrounding proper use of and potential abuse of magic in kabbalistic circles.

Significant in this context, R. Leyb ben Oyzer’s Yiddish version above was originally an appendix to his important biography of the mystical heretic and would-be messiah Sabbatai Zevi, a figure who set off the largest messianic movement in Jewish history.³⁸ R. Joseph della Reina’s status as a legendary *Doppelgänger* is of special

importance in the historical context of this widespread heresy as R. Solomon Ayllon, the source of R. Leyb ben Oyzer's Yiddish translation, is known to have been connected with the Sabbatian heresy rampant in the Jewish world in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³⁹

For Gershom Scholem this messianic heresy emerged, like the non-heretical Lurianism before it, out of an historical situation rife with catastrophe and an ideological environment permeated by Lurianism and its valorization of the messianic idea.⁴⁰ Once again for Scholem "political milieu and social events are only one part of the story,"⁴¹ while the "intense propaganda of Lurianism had created a climate favorable to the release of the messianic energies aroused by the victory of the new Kabbalah."⁴² Sabbatianism represents the most radical and far reaching historical manifestation of this "new Kabbalah," and although messianic claims were not uncommon in the Jewish world at the time, those of Sabbatai Zevi and his "prophet" Nathan of Gaza were believed on an unprecedented level as the movement "overwhelmed Jewish communities from Yemen and Persia to England, Holland, Russia and Poland."⁴³

In 1666 the mystical Messiah Sabbatai Zevi, after gaining widespread support for his messianic claims, set out for the Sultan's court in Istanbul in order to announce the immanent redemption of Israel and claim Palestine for the Jews. Before reaching his destination or fulfilling his messianic destiny as anticipated by his followers, he was arrested and given the choice between death and conversion to Islam.⁴⁴ Sabbatai Zevi accepted the turban -- at least publicly -- and avoided the scimitar. Their intense messianic hopes crushed, Sabbatai Zevi's massive following split between those who flatly condemned the apostasy and the "believers" who remained faithful. The latter

remained fully convinced that conversion must be an integral part of the messianic scheme.

It was Nathan of Gaza who played the key role in rationalizing (sic) this seemingly incomprehensible betrayal and Scholem claims that his success in keeping the Sabbatian faith alive even after the apostasy attests to the “depth of the movement.”⁴⁵ In defense of the Messiah’s apostasy Nathan explained the act as “the fulfillment of a mission to lift up the holy sparks which were dispersed even among the gentiles and concentrated now in Islam.”⁴⁶ Nathan further contended that “whereas the task of the Jewish people had been to restore the sparks of their own souls in the process of *tikkun* according to the demands of the Torah, there were sparks which only the Messiah himself could redeem, and for this he had to go down into the realm of the *kelippah*, outwardly to submit to its domination but actually to perform the last and most difficult part of his mission by conquering the *kelippah* from within.”⁴⁷ In Nathan of Gaza’s view the *khalifah* had, as it were, become a *kelippah* and it was the prerogative of the Messiah as well as his redemptive duty to enter this realm of darkness “acting like a spy sent into the enemy camp.”⁴⁸

As mentioned above, out of the mass of believers, their hopes seemingly betrayed, many rejected the Messiah outright while others refused to accept the possibility that the whole of Israel could have been so dreadfully wrong in interpreting the redemptive significance of such a tragic era and the messianic charisma of Sabbatai Zevi. Scholem has summarized the strange birth of this heresy:

“Heretical” Sabbatianism was born at the moment of Sabbatai Zevi’s totally unexpected conversion, when for the first time a

contradiction appeared between the two levels of the drama of redemption, that of the subjective experience of the individual on the one hand, and that of the objective historical facts on the other. The conflict was no less intense than unforeseen. One had to choose: either one heard the voice of God in the decree of history, or else one heard it in the newly revealed reality within. "Heretical" Sabbatianism was the result of the refusal of large sections of the Jewish people to submit to the sentence of history by admitting that their own personal experience had been false and untrustworthy.⁴⁹

The strength of the believer's conviction that redemption was immanent found expression in incredible acts of self-purgation which were conducted in messianic groups.

R. Leyb ben Oyzer, the translator of our version of R. Joseph's legend, describes in graphic detail the lengths to which Sabbatian piety and purgation could go in his biography of Sabbatai Zevi:

They devoted the whole day to good works, and recited the daily devotions as arranged at that time. At night men would lie down naked in the snow, and roll in it for half an hour or at least a quarter of an hour. Then they would take thorns and nettles and scourge themselves until their bodies were covered with blisters, and every day they would take a scourging with a hard lash... They neglected all other business and spent their time in the synagogues in deep meditation and repentance. Some caused boiling wax to drip down their naked bodies for an hour or more, others again wrapped their naked flesh in nettles and put on heavy clothes in order to increase the mortification of the flesh. In larger communities the supply of nettles from the neighborhood was insufficient, and they had to be obtained from afar and at great cost.⁵⁰

Those who continued to believe even after the apostasy fell into two main camps which Scholem categorized as "moderates" and "radicals."⁵¹ Although members of both continued to believe in the messianic mission of Sabbatai Zevi, the moderates felt that while the Messiah's sin was justified as redemptive necessity, the believer should

continue in the way of traditional piety and wait. The radicals, on the other hand, felt the believer was obliged to participate in the sin of the Messiah in order to expedite the redemption. For the radicals, the “transvaluation” of sin into an act of messianic import worked to legitimate both Sabbatai Zevi’s act of apostasy and the antinomian ritual practice of these extremist Sabbatian sects. For the radical believer, messianic ritual imperatives manifested themselves in the continuation of acts of extreme ascetic piety so vividly described by R. Leyb ben Oyzer above or in perpetration of intentional violations of Jewish law. Combinations of asceticism and antinomianism were also practiced. This latter antinomian trend left many radical believers open to the possibility of following Sabbatai Zevi into conversion as an imperative redemptive act.

According to Scholem, the radicals who remained convinced of Sabbatai Zevi’s messianic mission were ensnared in a psychological dilemma in which “paradox engendered paradox.”⁵² Once the Pandora’s box of paradoxical thinking was opened in attempting to explain the Messiah’s apostasy, the ideational groundwork was set for manifestations of extreme antinomian behavior among radical believers. Such behavior represented the perpetration of “redemption through sin.” The latter was a negative dialectical strategy of transgressive redemptive activism which valorized the *felix culpa* or beatific sin.

The believers focussed on elements of Jewish tradition which seemed to legitimate their radical behavior. Traditional texts like the commentary to Psalm 45:3 found in *Midrash Tehillim* seemed to condone radical forms of redemptive assertiveness: “Israel speaks to God: When will you redeem us? He answers: When you have sunk to the lowest level, at that time will I redeem you.”⁵³ For the radical Sabbatians the “lowest

level” came to mean not only the historical degradation of a battered, ghettoized and oppressed Judaism, but its spiritual state as well. This state was to be intentionally degraded through the systematic transgression of Jewish law. Traditional passages such as “The subversion of the Torah can become its true fulfillment”⁵⁴ and “David’s son comes only in an age which is either completely guilty or completely innocent”⁵⁵ were construed in such a way as to support Sabbatian antinomianism. Other “particular favorites” of the radical Sabbatians were Talmudic sayings like “David wished to worship idols”⁵⁶ and “A transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention”⁵⁷ or again “...the kingdom [namely the Roman Empire] will be converted through heresy.”⁵⁸

It was in the midst of this tumultuous time that R. Solomon Ayllon penned his version of R. Joseph della Reina. Scholem states that the legend “was very popular in the period after Sabbatai’s apostasy and may well have served as an appropriate symbol for the movement which, as many felt, had almost succeeded but had failed at the last moment. The man who proposed to bring redemption had delivered himself up to evil.”⁵⁹ These comments are made by Scholem in reference to a version written by another Sabbatian, R. Solomon Navarro. According to Scholem, Navarro “completed” the analogy in his own life through eventually marrying a gentile woman and converting to Christianity.⁶⁰

While drawing on oral and written traditions which had developed around R. Joseph della Reina, the Sabbatian and eventual apostate Solomon Navarro was the first to give “a description of Joseph’s fate after his failure to bring about the redemption. He became an ally of Satan and a lover of Lilith, and later fell in love with the wife of the

king of Greece, whom Lilith had brought to his bed every night. After some time this was revealed to the king and Joseph had to commit suicide⁶¹ – a motif which was kept by Solomon Ayllon although the queen was that of Absolutist France.

Joseph Dan attributes Sabbatian influence to an “attenuation” of the story’s central lesson as found in previous versions; namely the implicit injunction not to use the magic of practical Kabbalah to force the redemption. The Sabbatian versions display what Dan has called a “more sympathetic attitude” towards R. Joseph della Reina,⁶² a softening which was blatantly expressed when Luria, in line with belief in his merciful and saintly nature, gave redress to the black dog R. Joseph. Sympathy for R. Joseph as a mystical hero establishes this legendary figure into the tradition of classical tragedy in a way which is most revealing in the context of these Sabbatian versions. Paul Ricoeur concisely defines the quintessential spirit behind Greek tragedy:

The tragic properly so called does not appear until the theme of predestination to evil... comes up against the theme of heroic greatness; fate must first feel the resistance of freedom, rebound (so to speak) from the hardness of the hero, and finally crush him, before the pre-eminently tragic emotion – *phobos* – can be born. (We shall speak later of the other emotion, tragic compassion, in the setting of tragic purification.) Tragedy was the result of magnifying to the breaking point a two-fold set of problems: those concerning the “wicked god” and those concerning the “hero”; the Zeus of *Prometheus Bound* and Prometheus himself are the two poles of the tragic theology and anthropology. With the figure of Zeus the movement tending to incorporate the diffused satanism of the *daimones* into the supreme figure of the “divine” is brought to completion; and with him, consequently, the problematics of the “wicked god,” the undivided unity of the divine and the satanic reaches its highest pitch.⁶³

In light of Sabbatian theology and, specifically, Nathan of Gaza’s conception of evil, the idea of the “wicked god” is quite revealing and sets up an interpretation of R.

Joseph della Reina as tragic hero. The foundation of Nathan's cosmology was the idea of two diametrically opposed halves of the universe or *tehiru*. Based on the Lurianic conception of *zimzum* (the self-contraction of the divine to make room for creation), Nathan held that the thoughtful light which came streaming back into creation after the divine inhalation never reached "the great deep of the Abyss." This Abyss would henceforth be the realm of the thoughtless light.⁶⁴ Locked in a cosmic struggle with one another since creation, the "thoughtful" light initiates creation and change while the "thoughtless" light resists change and destroys.

What is important in this conception is that the thoughtless light does not stand somewhere outside the *Ein-Sof* (the infinite Godhead) but is part of it. It merely takes on an evil aspect "because it is opposed to the existence of anything but *Ein-Sof* and therefore is set on destroying the structures produced by the thoughtful light."⁶⁵ Scholem states that the thoughtless light is "not evil in itself" and that for Nathan "What is called the power of evil, the *kelippah*, is in the last resort rooted in this noncreative light in God himself."⁶⁶

The fact that both lights are "grounded in the *Ein-Sof*" sets the stage for the Messiah's heroic struggle. The *tehiru* in Sabbatian terminology is split between the half where the thoughtful light rules – it is only here that Lurianic conceptions of restoration through the Torah are valid -- and the *sitra ahra* (the other side) ruled by "serpents dwelling in the abyss" and which had held the soul of the Messiah captive since creation.⁶⁷ It is the unique prerogative of the Messiah to open up the *sitra ahra* to a redemptive influx from the thoughtful light, and while the average soul is ruled by the

Torah, the soul of the Messiah is a law unto himself in his struggle to win release from his long, dark imprisonment in the lower world.⁶⁸

The role of R. Joseph della Reina in such a scheme would be that of a Kabbalistic Prometheus out to steal the Messianic fire of redemption from where it is trapped in the thoughtless light of the *Ein-Sof*. Just like Prometheus, Joseph della Reina “is the benefactor of mankind; he suffers because he has loved the human race too much.”⁶⁹ Again like Aeschylus’s Prometheus who the great tragedian lifted out of “the roguery of “course rustic mischievousness,””⁷⁰ the legend lifts the endeavor of this kabbalistic magician out of the dregs of charlatanism and superstition, granting him likewise “the tragic grandeur of a suffering servant.”⁷¹

The Sabbatian cosmology divides the *tehiru* between the “passion of the night and the lawfulness of day,”⁷² humanity being caught in the cruel clutches of the conflict between the thoughtful and thoughtless light since the beginning of time. R. Joseph’s attempt to untie this knot of fate follows exactly the pattern of Greek tragedy described by Ricoeur. As the hero asserts his freedom it sends the fates reeling until they can recover at the precise moment the hero is closest to breaking their chains. The very implausibility of R. Joseph offering incense to the black dog after the many warnings from Elijah attests to the fact that it was not his single mistake which turned the tide on him, but the very scheme of things which doomed his “immoderate” and “excessive” mystical quest from the start. Yet the moment when the black dog is chained and magically prepared for redemptive slaughter is the very one in which “the hero introduces into the heart of the inevitable a germ of uncertainty, a temporary delay...”⁷³ This moment of doubt, however, is more than a dramatic tool in the kabbalistic context of

Joseph della Reina. It recalls the potential messianic doorway out of the stranglehold of fate on the Jewish people, a doorway perhaps to be opened by human hands onto a redeemed world. This was a door which the Sabbatian believer refused to close even temporarily.

It would be precisely this doorway to redemption, in its twentieth century secular forms which Isaac Bashevis Singer hoped to close, or at least to rage against as a seductive messianic mirage rife with political danger. Dressing his historical pessimism and political passivism in archaic garb, the kabbalistic hero of redemption, R. Joseph della Reina would play a crucial role in Bashevis's negative theurgy on the emanations of secular messianism, as the author repeatedly sought to undermine the tragic in his legend, strategically replacing it with messianic farce.

Notes

¹ Scholem summarizes the historical record in a footnote: "Joseph della Reyna was an historical personality and probably died as a professing Jew. Magical traditions in his name and that of his son, Isaac della Reyna, are quoted in some kabbalistic MSS. Texts written by him were discovered by M. Benayahu in a MS. of the Sassoon Collection." Scholem also states that the legend is based on "an earlier account of an actual attempt of a Spanish kabbalist [R. Joseph della Reina himself, KJ] around 1470 to bring on the messiah by methods of practical Kabbalah." Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: the Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 75-6.

² Gershom Scholem, "Religious Authority and Mysticism," in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 13.

³ Gershom Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ "Conservative messianism" refers to those who believed that redemption will not be "achieved by one single messianic act, but will be effected through a long chain of activities that prepare the way." Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset, 1974), 245.

⁶ Scholem, *Sabbatai*, 337.

⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹ Judah he-Hasid's (d. 1217) *Sefer Hasidim* stands as the central work of medieval Ashkenazi Jewry. *Ibid.*, 37. Joseph Gikatilla's seminal *Sha'arei Orah* (c. 1290) systematized sefirotic cosmology. *Ibid.*, 59. Isaac of Acre (b. 1291) was an original kabbalistic commentator, synthesizer of various esoteric trends and contemporary of Moses de Leon, author of the Zohar. *Ibid.*, 233. Samson of Ostropol (d. 1648) was a highly influential kabbalistic thinker of Polish Jewry who maintained an unprecedented obsession with "the names and forces of the 'other side'" [i.e. demonology]. Scholem, *Sabbatai*, 82-3. Joel Ba'al Shem Tov published "prominent" works of practical kabbalah *Toledot Adam* (1720) and *Mef'alot Elohim* (1727). Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 185.

¹⁰ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 267.

¹¹ Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Atheneum, 1939), 90.

¹² Scholem, *Symbolism*, 6-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁴ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 74.

¹⁵ Scholem defines *tiqqun* as "restoration" or "the process by which the shattered elements of the world would be restored to harmony – which is the essential task of the Jewish people – and the final result, the state of redemption announced by the appearance of the Messiah, who marks the last stage. Political

liberation, and all that the national myth connected with it , were seen as no more than external symbols of a cosmic process which in fact takes place in the secret recesses of the universe.” *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁶ Scholem, *Sabbatai*, 75.

¹⁷ Idel, *Perspectives*, 269.

¹⁸ Gershom Scholem, “Redemption through Sin,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 87.

¹⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 420.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 427.

²² *Ibid.*, 245.

²³ Idel has called into question Scholem’s thesis of a popularized Lurianic Kabbalah. Idel, *Perspectives*, 257-60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-4 and 265-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 268-70.

²⁸ Gershom Scholem, “The Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 38.

²⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 424-5.

³⁰ Joseph Dan, “R. Joseph della Reina” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1st ed., vol. X.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 58.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁶ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).

³⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 184.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Incidentally, the Amsterdam sexton R. Leyb ben Oyzer translated Ayllon’s version in the same year as the first publication of the Zohar in Yiddish translation. See Maks Erik, *Di geshikte fun der*

yidisher literatur fun di eltste tsaytn biz der haskole tkufe, fertsnter-akhtsnter yorhundert (Warsaw: *Farlag Kultur-lige*, 1928), 239.

⁴⁰ Gershom Scholem states that he “seems, in fact, to have belonged to those moderate Shabbateans who remained faithful to rabbinical tradition.” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1st ed., vol. III, s.v. “R. Solomon Ayllon.”

⁴¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 245.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁴ Gershom Scholem, “The Crisis of Tradition in Jewish Messianism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 60.

⁴⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai*, 679-86.

⁴⁶ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 265.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁰ Gershom Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 88.

⁵¹ Scholem, *Sabbatai*, 474.

⁵² For more on this distinction see Scholem, “Redemption” in *Idea*, 78-141.

⁵³ Scholem, “Redemption,” in *Idea*, 88.

⁵⁴ Scholem, “Understanding,” in *Idea*, 11-12.

⁵⁵ Scholem, “Redemption,” in *Idea*, 110.

⁵⁶ *Ets Hayim* IX, 5 p.103. Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941) 317-18.

⁵⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 107a.

⁵⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Nazir* 23b.

⁵⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 97a. References 59, 60, 61 as quoted in Scholem, *Sabbatai*, 805.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Joseph della Reina.”

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 218.

⁶⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 270.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 270-1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, *Evil*, 223.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

IV. Isaac Bashevis Singer and The Damnation of R. Joseph della Reina.

Crescit cum magia haeresis et cum haeresi magia....

[Heresy grows alongside sorcery, and sorcery alongside heresy...]

-Thomas Stapleton, 1549¹

Der sotn in goray: a mayse fun fartsaytns (Satan in Goray: A Tale from the Past),² portrays the devastating consequences of messianic gullibility in a small *shtetl* of the Polish hinterland following the Cossack and peasant revolt of 1648-9. The uprising, lead by the Ukrainian hetman Bogdan Chmielnicki, lead to widespread massacres of the Jewish population and utterly destroyed many small towns in the Ukraine and Poland.³

Der sotn in goray is a cautionary tale in which the rabbinic narrator preaches against Sabbatian excess and redemption through sin. The name of R. Joseph della Reina makes a conspicuous appearance at the moment of diabolic climax as Believers lose themselves in the ecstasy of a Sabbatian black sabbath. Significantly, it is the only time direct mention is made of the legendary figure in the course of the novel, although allusions to the story of the rebel Rabbi are numerous -- the legendary foundation underpinning Bashevis' portrayal of the mystical heresy being made explicit only at the point of absolute debauch.

The scene is set for R. Joseph's presence as the *shtetl's* elderly Rabbi, R. Benish, lacking the will and means to fight heretical trends following in the wake of extreme persecution, abandons the town to the Sabbatian sect. Reb Gedaliya, a respected ritual slaughterer and Sabbatian faithful from Zamosc, moves to Goray and assumes charismatic leadership of the community, as the news reaches Goray that the messiah

has been revealed and is on his way to take the crown from the Sultan in Istanbul. Reb Gedaliya carries the Believers ever deeper into Sabbatian antinomian practice until the entire community is entwined in an attempt to force the hand of the divine by means of “redemption through sin.” Bashevis’ narrator, a pious Jew recording in retrospect the deeds of the sect with intent to horrify and warn, describes Sabbatian practice in graphic detail:

Reb gedalye zol on dem visn fun zayn ishe rekhele oysbahalt'n ba zikh a goye a zoyne, vos iz eygns tsugeshikt gevorn tsu der kat fun zamoshtsh. af zayn Brust hintern talis-kotn hengt a kuperner tseylem un in tash fun zayn buzem iz farborgn a yoyzl. banakht kumen tsu im liles un ire badinerns un er iz zikh mit zey metame. shabes-tsu-nakhts tut er on royte kleyder un a tolpan, vi a terk, un geyt aroys tsuzamen mit zayne talmidim tsu der khurve fun altn shlos. dort bavayzt zikh tsu zey der sam un ale tsuzamen buk'n zikh tsu an oppot fun leym. dernokh tantsn zey arum mit shturkatsn. oykh reb yosef dela reyne kumt ahin fun har-soir in geshtalt fun a shvartsn hunt. dernokh geyen ale arayn in di gevelbungen fun shlos un esn dortn a sude fun ever min ha-khay, dehayne: zey raysn shtiker fun lebedike oyfes un fartsern dos tsuzamen mitn blut... nokh der sude bashlofn foters zeyere tekhter, brider -- shvester zin -- di muters.⁴

[Reb Gedaliya was said to have secreted a whore sent him by the sect in Zamosc somewhere in his house without the knowledge of his wife, Rechele. A copper cross hung on his breast, under the fringed vest, and an image lay in his breast pocket. At night Lilith and her attendants Namah and Machlot visited him, and they consorted together. Sabbath eve, dressing in scarlet garments and a fez, like a Muslim, he accompanied his disciples to the ruins of the old castle near Goray. There Samael presented himself to them, and they all prostrated themselves together before a clay image. Then they danced in a ring with torches in their hand. Rabbi Joseph de la Reina, the traitor, descended from Mount Seir to join them in the shape of a black dog. Afterward, as the legend went, they would enter the castle vaults and feast on the flesh from the living – rending live fowl with their hands, and devouring the meat with the blood. When they had finished feasting, fathers would know their daughters, brothers their sisters, sons their mothers.]⁵

In the passage a series of negative symbolism conspires with the black dog incarnation of R. Joseph della Reina to impress the seal of damnation onto the scene: a copper cross, an icon, Lilith, Namah, Machlot, fez, Muslim, Samael, the eating of live animals, idol worship, and incest.

In translation the symbolic vitality of “black dog” is not diminished, the image being equally part of both the Jewish and non-Jewish folk imagination. Its indispensable role in the legends of Faust would further deepen any understanding of the passage in the mind of a reader the least bit familiar with European literature. Similarly, the very strangeness of the exotic names drawn from the dark side of the kabbalistic angelology, Namah and Machlot (both missing in the original), makes them effective contributors to the infernal atmosphere of the scene even if the reader lacks of any direct knowledge of their traditional diabolic duties. In the case of R. Joseph della Reina, however, the designation “Rabbi” could very easily confuse the uninitiated reader, the title usually being associated with a life lived within the restrictions of Jewish Law. The Sloan-Bashevis translation attempts to remedy this predicament and to impregnate the English with the frightful resonance accompanying the mere mention of R. Joseph della Reina in the original Yiddish by adding the compensatory epithet “that traitor”.

This tactic represents a narrative breach in the translation no less compromising than having to explain a good joke. That the symbolic impact of a culturally specific figure like R. Joseph della Reina should be muffled in translation is an unfortunate yet unavoidable necessity; the symbolic squelch put on the description of Reb Gedaliya’s Christian paraphernalia however – Sloan-Singer translating *yoyzl*, a strong Yiddish pejorative for Jesus, into the neutralizing gloss “image” -- seems inexplicable except as a strategy for Singer to tiptoe around perceived sensitivities of his ever growing non-Jewish readership at the time of the translation in 1955. The

most important point here is that Pagan, Christian and Muslim imagery and practice combine with the figure of R. Joseph della Reina and kabbalistic demonology to malign the messianic movement. This eclectic mixture amounts to a cocktail of imagery both foreign and integral to the Eastern European Jewish imagination which effectively brings home Bashevis' fundamental point of the potential disintegrating effects of activist messianism on Jewish cultural and religious autonomy.

It is no accident that direct mention of R. Joseph della Reina comes at the moment the narrator -- an old-style Yiddish storyteller who does not partake in Bashevis' messianic pessimism but nevertheless shares his messianic quietism -- describes the worst excesses of the mystical heresy. In the legendary form of the black dog, R. Joseph della Reina represents a kind of canine anti-saint. As will be seen in subsequent examples, he repeatedly returns to revel and partake in the orgiastic demise of those who stray outside the strictures of Jewish law in their inability to endure the plight of history.

Bashevis and his rabbinic narrator, like so many portrayals of R. Joseph della Reina and Faust before them, work on the assumption that the "black dog" image will evoke dread in the imagination of their reader. For Bashevis the black dog carries its specifically Jewish meaning as the embodiment of punishment and divine justice directed against messianic hubris, but the author is simultaneously aware that the image touches on the more mundane fear that dogs in general traditionally struck into the hearts of the Jews of Eastern Europe -- a fear he apparently believed even those readers raised in traditions of Enlightenment had not fully escaped.⁶

Some chapters before the passage quoted above, when Goray was still flourishing under Reb Gedaliya's leadership and before the fall into extreme antinomian excess, the

emblem of the black dog already functions as a narrative link between this charismatic Sabbatian usurper of traditional Rabbinic authority and the figure of R. Joseph della Reina:

Zint er iz gekumen, hot er kame mentshn opgeratevet. er hot mit zayne kameyes fartribn nisht-gute fun a hoyz, vu zey hobn gevoynt un zikh gefrukhpert, un tsurikgekert dem diber a kind, vos hot zikh dershrokn far a shvartsn hunt. zayn khsides un lomdes vern gerimt.”⁷

[Since coming to Goray, Reb Gedaliya had saved many a soul. With his amulets he exorcised evil spirits from a house where they had dwelt and multiplied for years; he also restored the power of speech to a child who had been frightened by a black dog. Reb Gedaliya’s piety and learning were famous.]⁸

The color specification of the dog as “black” steeps the incident in the superstition so alive in the mind of the average *shtetl* Jew. The mention of an image drawn directly from R. Joseph della Reina’s legend also represents Bashevis’ first in a series of allusions which will taint Reb Gedaliya’s acts of mercy with the misdirected and disastrous benevolence of his medieval predecessor as the historical and legendary remain inextricably intertwined in the mind of the narrator.

The early period of Reb Gedaliya’s rule in Goray is a period of unprecedented happiness, prosperity and renewal to a community devastated by the Chmielnicki massacres, yet Bashevis never allows his reader to escape the ominous feeling that this time of plenty is haunted by impending eclipse and doom. Thus in the midst of this list of Reb Gedaliya’s *mitsves* or good deeds, the mere mention of “black dog” works to foreshadow the coming disaster and to accent the illusory nature of Goray’s status as a land of milk and honey.

If one accepts the proposition that the black dog is a direct allusion to R. Joseph della Reina, then a highly significant allegorical meaning can be gleaned from the incident involving the speechless boy which reflects on the role of the legend in Jewish history. In

such an allegorical reading the boy would represent what Bashevis perceived as naive messianic credulousness in Jewish history. As for the black dog, it would represent the legend of R. Joseph della Reina itself, rendering messianic trends “speechless,” as it were, and lessening their historical potency. Finally, Reb Gedaliya would complete the allegory as the Sabbatian zealot who restores speech to messianic impulses (the mute boy) and tears down the hedge traditionally built around such trends by the cautionary aspects of the legend.

The passage is a good example of Bashevis’ “atomic” use of elements taken from R. Joseph della Reina’s notorious legend and his free-handed interjection of these elements into diverse contexts, a narrative tactic which both endows the passage with Bashevis’ intended atmosphere and revitalizes the legendary imagery itself. Two further highly allusive passages utilize atomic elements from the legend as well and help tie the character of Reb Gedaliya with that of R. Joseph della Reina. In these instances the medium would be Goray’s Sabbatian prophetess Rechele, Reb Gedaliya’s ecstatic and mentally unstable consort in perpetuating the sect. In the following scene Rechele lies in her bed weakened by fasting when the angel Sandalfon⁹ appears to her in a vision:

Rechele, shtark dikh! ikh bin der sar sandalfn! -- hot a zingendik un forkhtik kol geshprokhn. -- hiney, nun hob ikh getun tsunoyfzamlen dayne trern in a logl un zey oyfgebrakht farn kise-hakoved... dayne tkhines-vebakoshes hobn getun shpaltn di shive rakiim. gey un loz-hern beozney hakhoreydim al dvar adoyshe, dos af rosh-hashone vet zayn di geule-shleyne... un tsu reb gedalyen dem kodesh zolstu iberentfern: ale oylemes elyoinim tuen tsitern fun zayne yikhudim... biz tsum heykhl ken tsipoyr greykht der koyekh fun zayne sheymes hakdoyschim... srofim veoyfaney hakoydesh knipn fun zey kroynen tsu der shkhine...¹⁰

[“Rechele, be strong and of good cheer! I am the Angel Sandalfon!” an awesome voice said. “For lo, I shall put thy tears into a gourd and bear them up on high to the Throne of Glory. Thy prayers and supplications have penetrated the seven firmaments. Go, and proclaim in the ears of those that tremble at the word of God that the perfect and full redemption will come at the new year. And to Reb Gedaliya, that saintly man, thou shalt announce: ‘all the worlds on high do tremble at the unions he

doth form. The power of his combinations reaches even to the heavenly mansions. From these combinations seraphim and angels twist coronets for the Divine Presence.”¹¹

Reb Gedaliya and Rechele are the novel’s earthly counterparts to the demonic firm of Samael and Lilith in popular Jewish cosmology. Familiar themes from the legend of R. Joseph della Reina again work to link the two leading figures of the Sabbatian sect in Goray to their predecessor in the annals of the messianic heritage: Rechele through the theurgical power of her fasting and tears; Reb Gedaliya through his shaking of the celestial spheres by means of kabbalistic name magic and *yihudim*.

The angel Sandalfon, a figure missing in R. Leyb ben Oyzer’s early eighteenth century version, heralds the immanent redemption of Goray and Israel. The powerful angel is not, however, foreign to the traditions of R. Joseph della Reina. In 1926 Sh. Bastomski, a prominent Yiddish folklorist, published a long version of the R. Joseph della Reina legend in which Sandalfon played an important role. Bastomski’s source gives a much more detailed account of R. Joseph della Reina’s ascent through the heavenly spheres in his search for the appropriate mystical knowledge and tools to bring about the redemption, and of his subsequent descent into the infernal realm where he and his companions find both Samael and Lilith in the familiar form of enormous black dogs.

Bastomski’s source gives a less detailed account of R. Joseph’s “fallen” state after his failure to force the Redemption than does R. Leyb ben Oyzer’s rendering, it does however add one important detail missing in the latter: “... *hot er farshtanen, az er vet shoyt keyn oylem-habe oykh nit hobn. darum hot er zikh metame geven mit ale mini tumes, bifrat mit liles hamarushe.*”¹² [“... he understood that he had no part in the world to come. Therefore he

defiled himself with all manner of uncleanness, especially with Lilith the Evil One.”] The explicit connection of Lilith with R. Joseph della Reina is one to which Bashevis is possibly alluding to in his description of the relationship between his sibylline Rechele and Reb Gedaliya.

In Bastomski’s source R. Joseph is sent up through the ranks of heaven starting with Elijah the Prophet who is followed by Sandalfon, and finally the two highest angels, Akasriel and Metatron. He is met with hostility at each step, but because of his extreme piety, nobility of purpose and mystical competence, manages to convince each to give him the secret for reaching the next angelic sphere until he is fully informed on how to reach and destroy Samael and Lilith. The following passage is typical of R. Joseph’s extended search in Bastomski’s source:

Tsum sof hobn zey geshrien “ananu elohey ha-merkave ananu!” un hobn bashvoyrn dem malekh sandalfn mit zayn gantser makhne mit di sheymes, vos elyevove hot zey geheysn, zey zoln kumen tsu zey.

un bald, vi zey hobn gezogt, iz gekumen der malekh sandalfn mit zayn gantser makhne. un es iz gevorn a groyser shturem fun zey un es iz gevorn ful mit fayer der gantser veg. iz rebe yosef mit di talmidim anidergefaln khaloshes far groys pakhed. zey hobn zikh ober geshtarkt un hobn geshmekt psomim. zenen zey tsu zikh gekumen... un vi der malekh iz gekumen, hot er geton a geshrey: “vi falstu oys azelkhes tsu ton, du zindiker mentsh? vi hostu gekent hobn aza khutspe tsu dervekn ale eybershte veltn, nit gekukt af dayn niderikn shtand? ze, zits op fun haynt on un tu shoyn nit mer azelkhes, kedey du zolst nit farbrent vern fun der luft fun mayn makhne.”¹³

[Finally he shouted out “Answer us God of the mystical chariot, answer us!” And they conjured the angel Sandalfon with all his host through the Holy Names which Elijah the Prophet had told them in order to reach them.

And as soon as they said (the Holy Names), the Angel Sandalfon came with all his host. And there arose a great storm from them and the entire path was filled with fire. R. Joseph and his students swooned and fell down in great fear. They strengthened themselves and smelled incense. They came to... And when the Angel approached he shouted: “How did you get the idea to do such a thing, you sinful man? How could have the gall to awaken all the higher worlds, ignoring your lowly

position? Look! Leave this thing from here on out and no longer do such things so that you are not burned up in the wind of my host.]¹⁴

Rabbi Joseph then pleads with Sandalfon to give him the strength to speak, the angel's tone softening dramatically when he finds out the reason for R. Joseph's mystical adventurism:

Hot im der malekh geentfert: -- "du bist gants gerekht, halevay volt men dikh tsugehert, az got zol zayn mit dir, vorum ale heylike un brenedike khayoles fun dem himl zitsn un hofn, ven me vet zikh shoyt noykem zayn di nekome fun hashem yisborekh, un di shkhine hakedoyshe zol zikh oyfhoyn, vos zi iz aropgenidert biz arop."¹⁵

[The Angel answered: -- "You are absolutely right, I wish that you would be heard. May God be with you for all the holy and fiery hosts of heaven sit and hope for the vengeance of the Lord, may His Name be blessed, and for the Divine Presence to lift herself up for she has sunk to the lowest level."]

In this version of the legend the paradoxical themes of caution and encouragement already familiar from R. Leyb ben Oyzer, arise in a typically indeterminate manner. It would be interesting to know if Bashevis had access to Bastomski's source at the time of writing *Sotn in goray*; what is important here, however, is the fact that Sandalfon is intimately connected with R. Joseph della Reina in the folk tradition and that Bashevis gives Sandalfon a role in opposition to that tradition. A closer look at Bashevis' unique manipulation of the figure of Sandalfon tells much about the author's radically anti-humanistic view of historical causation.

Unlike the two folk sources for R. Joseph della Reina in which R. Joseph della Reina must magically conjure the heavenly personages, Bashevis' Sandalfon volunteers himself as a

messenger of Redemption in Rechele's vision. The angel reaches out to legitimate and enhance the status of both the prophetess and Reb Gedaliya. Two important points are thereby revealed about Bashevis' narrative strategies and his underlying philosophy: first, he felt that individual human beings and humanity in general had very little power to steer their destiny and were instead driven by forces from without, forces which the Jews in Eastern Europe, like Hegel before them, consistently fooled themselves into believing were leading to the good. In Bashevis' view they were actually rushing them to their doom. Thus Sandalfon's redemptive assertiveness, unique to Bashevis' handling of the figure, stands for those transpersonal currents of history driving rather than being driven by the individual lives caught up in them. Second, Bashevis investigates the psychology of the tendency to self-deception in circumstances beyond the individual's control and further, in the case of Goray or the Sabbatian movement as a whole, the self-deception of whole communities. For the Sabbatian prophetess Rechele, ridden with guilt over her unacknowledged sexual desire towards Reb Gedaliya and haunted by fear originating in the disaster and displacement of her youth, angelic visions carrying the promise of Redemption are manifestations of repressed passion and trauma.

Shortly after awaking from her vision, Rechele storms into the house of study, a place generally forbidden to women, and reports the revelation:

Yehudim, voyl tsu aykh un freyd tsu ayere neshomes... a groys likht hob ikh gezen... belayle iz tsu mir antplekt gevorn hasar hagodl vehanoyre sandalfn... a bsure-toyve hot er ongekindikt... afrosh hashone habo aleynu letoyve veln di yoreyim zikh aynzamlen keyn yerusholaim... un vegn dem kodesh reb gedalyen hot er geredt... es hot shoyn gegreykht di tsayt er zol nisgale vern... den er iz a getlekher man vebal gile elye.. un er iz zoykhe tsu zen poney ha-shkhine ...¹⁶

[Oh Jews! Happy are you, and happy your souls! I have beheld a great light. At midnight the great and awful Angel Sandalfon came to me. He announced wondrous things. At the time of the new year good shall come to us, for the godfearing shall gather in Jerusalem....And as for the saintly man, Reb Gedaliya, the Angel declared: 'The time has come for him to be revealed. For he is a godly man, and worthy, like Elijah, to behold the face of the Divine Presence.']¹⁷

Here again inaccuracies in the Sloan-Singer translation betray an essential point which helps connect Reb Gedaliya with R. Joseph della Reina. It is not that Reb Gedaliya is worthy "like Elijah" as the translation would have, but rather that he is worthy because Elijah has revealed himself to Gedaliya, an honor only granted those with great spiritual prowess and persuasiveness like R. Joseph della Reina before him.

Der sotn in goray is communal tragedy, the demise of individual characters like that of Rechele, the demented prophetess of Sabbatai Zevi and Reb Gedaliya, representing wider transpersonal currents which speak like the coarse voices of dybbuks out of Bashevis' grotesque portrayals of devastated lives in post-Chmielnicki Poland. In Bashevis' more communally focussed pictures of downfall and human vulnerability in the chaos of the world, the author sets a stage of utter impoverishment and despair which makes resistance to the misguided heralds of the messianic age virtually impossible. Pitiably communities such as Goray or Kreshev in the novelette *Der khurbm fun kreshev* (The Destruction of Kreshev) are trapped in the tragic snare of history embodied in massacre and persecution from without and seductive promises of redemption from within. In Bashevis' worldview both are ultimately destructive. As Dan Miron has observed, "Human existence and certainly, Jewish existence appeared to him [Bashevis] suffused with evil and suffering, torn apart from within by internal conflicts that cannot be resolved, pervaded by an absurdity both comical and tragic."¹⁸ Thus to the question asked by the optimist Bertolt Brecht, "*Soll es heißen: wer der Tiefe entrann Fällt auf der*

Höhe?” [“Can it be: he who flees the depth falls on the heights?”] the pessimist Bashevis would most certainly answer in the affirmative.

A second example of the intimate relationship between heresy and R. Joseph della Reina in Bashevis’ work can be found in his first “American” novel serialized in New York for the *Forverts* from October 5, 1935 to February 22, 1936, *Der zindiker meshiekh* (“The Sinful Messiah”). Bashevis subtitles the novel “- a *historisher roman*” (“- a historical novel”) as he sets out to describe the personality, world and thought of Jacob Frank (1726-91), the founder of the “Frankist” heresy – a radical sect representing the “last stage in the Sabbatean movement.”¹⁹ Although the novel is weak, written while Bashevis was desperately displaced after his immigration, the two passages below clearly show how the author again integrates themes from the legend of R. Joseph della Reina into the structure of a work which investigates the nature of messianic heresy.

Perhaps because the novel was not only published, but also written installment by installment, it gives the impression of being less woven than quilted or collaged; a characteristic which leaves some of Bashevis’ narrative techniques relatively more transparent than do his more successfully integrated works. The following passage records some of the fantastic rumors spreading around the messianic pretender Frank; rumors which reflect that curious admixture of legend and fact, the spiritual and physical, typical of Bashevis’ portrayal of the Jewish world:

*Men hot geredt af im az mit der hilf fun nisht-gute hot er aroysgeganvet dos vayb fun a raykhn terk. banakht flegn di sheydim zi im brengen un fartog hobn zey zi tsurikgetrogn, azoy az nisht bloyz der man hot nisht dervust vos men tut mit zayn vayb, nor zi aleyn hot oykh nisht dervust.*²⁰

[It was rumored about him that with the help of evil spirits he stole away the wife of a rich Turk. Demons would bring her to him at night and by daybreak they would carry her back home so that the husband was unaware of what was being done to his wife and the woman herself had no idea.]

This passage comes at the point in the novel where Jacob Frank has just brought his heretical gospel to Smyrna, the birthplace of Shabbatai Zevi and a focal point for the storm which raged around the sect. The folk motif of magical abduction, so central to the “fallen” R. Joseph della Reina in R. Leyb ben Oyzer’s version, makes a conspicuous appearance here. The rumor comes from the mouths of those Jews in the Ottoman city who wish to steer clear of the messianic upstart and warn others to do the same. They therefore make a legendary and condemning connection between the newcomer Frank and R. Joseph della Reina *after* his failure to force Redemption. Like Bashevis’ narrator in *Sotn in goray*, memories of the excesses of Sabbatian practice and their disastrous results remain fresh in the memories of these wary members of the community. The cautionary aspect of R. Joseph della Reina’s legend adds a narrative sting to their message of warning.

Shortly after this passage, a second theme central to R. Joseph della Reina’s legend appears, this time from its heroic aspect: “*Er hot eydes gezogt az er hot aleyh gezen vi elye-nove iz gekumen tsu im benakht un mit im gelernt kabole.*”²¹ [“He gave witness that he had seen with his very own eyes how Elijah the Prophet came to him at night and taught him Kabbalah.”] In both passages Bashevis allows the reader to overhear the many rumors hovering around Frank’s presence in the city, but the second

is disseminated by one of Frank's local devotees named Nakhmen and stands diametrically opposed to the first. This Nakhmen testifies in Jacob Frank's favor, and therefore focuses on the holy "Messianic guardian," Elijah the Prophet, as proof of Jacob Frank's favor with the divine, just as was done in the first part of R. Joseph della Reina's legend. Like Rechele's sanction of R. Gedaliye's Sabbatian authority in Goray, *gile-elye*, or the revelation of the Prophet Elijah is used once again to legitimate devotion to a messianic sect. In this manner Bashevis mobilizes and juxtaposes the two "souls" of the legend to accentuate the split communal reaction to Frank's messianic presence.

In 1928 Bashevis published *Afn oylem-hatoy-e* (In a World of Chaos),²² a short story which demarcates the author's "kabbalistic turn."²³ This was a turn, although not yet complete at the time of this story, from the more conventional naturalism of his early writing toward the gothic and demonic naturalism which would define his unique place in Yiddish literature. This turn towards the fantastic would also, many years later, help open the door to a popularity with non-Yiddish readers unchallenged by any other Yiddish writer including the classicists. Significantly, none of Bashevis' tales would ever be tied more closely to the legend of R. Joseph della Reina.

True to the short story form, Bashevis concisely fills out the warped character of his anti-hero Shimen, the son of a *shtetl* Rabbi, calling him "...an *akshn*, a *kaysn*, a *mrak*..." ["...obstinate, short-tempered, surly..."]. In the opening paragraph Bashevis reports this foul-natured discontent and misanthrope rolling in nettles and popping the blisters with needles -- a practice familiar from R. Leyb ben Oyzer's description of

Sabbatian ascetic excess and a clue to the reader to look for allusions to the legend of R. Joseph della Reina.

Rumors spread in the *shtetl* about the Rabbi's misguided son: "...*az der parshoyn hot enyonim mit a nisht-guts, un as m'hot im gezen raytn af a tsap un foroys iz gelofn a shvartser, kudlater hunt...*" ["...that the person has dealings with an evil spirit and he had been seen riding on a billy goat and a shaggy black dog ran ahead..."] Once again the black dog appears where Bashevis is about to describe the downfall of a messianic crusader. That the black dog is "shaggy" fits Shimen's role as a demented and scruffy incarnation of R. Joseph della Reina, Bashevis robbing the figure of the pristine elitism associated with the kabbalistic figure of the late Middle Ages. The tattered Shimen thus presents a literary correlate to the radical overturn of medieval kabbalistic exclusivity via Lurianic Kabbalah, Sabbatianism and Hasidism.

One further rumor associates Shimen with a different animal image which Bashevis often linked with such characters, "...*a dinstmeydl hot geshvoyrn mit heylike shvues, az zi hot im gezen shpiln zikh mit tsvey kets...*" ["...a servant girl swore by sacred oaths that she saw him playing with two cats."] The gloss "*kets*", meaning "cats" in the Yiddish is a bilingual homophone with the Hebrew word meaning, "the end of exile, the coming of the Messiah."²⁴ Like R. Joseph della Reina before him, Shimen is playing dangerously with redemption, his name itself signaling a warning deriving as it does from the Hebrew root *shin, mem, ayin*: to hearken.²⁵

Shimen abandons house and home convinced that only he holds the mystical keys necessary to force the Redemption. Confused to extremes, the disjointed nature of Shimen's search contrasts with the symmetry of the celestial and infernal²⁶ spheres

through which his legendary predecessor must ascend and descend in turn.

Nevertheless, Bashevis makes the connection between Shimen's story and that of R.

Joseph della Reina explicit as he reports a conversation Shimen had shortly before

leaving his *shtetl* Lomaz:

Zikher ba zikh, az r'iz dergangen in kabole-maysis bizn sof, ken di bahaltene sheymes un veyst di farborgnste vinklekh fun ale heykholes, hot shimen opgepast tsu farrikhtn dos, vos r' yosef dela reyne hot kalye gemakht, oysgefinen dem sotn un on shum derbaremdikayt fun im makhn a tel... nokh etlekhe vokhn frier eyder r'iz avek in goles, hot er a mol a zog getun tsum altn ayzshe gabe mit tsorn un mit kritsndike tseyen: -- dela reyne iz geven a roshe un a shoyte dertsu! fun mayne hent volt er mer nisht aroys keyn lebediker, samoel der tome!²⁷

[Certain that he had thoroughly mastered the practical Kabbalah, that he knew the magical names and had penetrated the most hidden reaches of the upper spheres, Shimen decided to correct that which Joseph della Reina had spoiled: to discover Satan and mercilessly destroy him.²⁸ A few weeks earlier, before he went into exile, he angrily said to Ayzshe the synagogue warden with his teeth grinding: "Della Reina was a wicked man and a fool. That filth Samael wouldn't have gotten out of my hands alive!]

One further glaring and very important difference emerges out of Bashevis' truly grotesque portrayal of Shimen as latter-day R. Joseph della Reina: unlike his medieval and early modern predecessors, Shimen's attempt to force redemption is made absolutely alone. Shimen is truly individual in the most negative sense of the word. He is locked in the box of his deluded messianic dreams and kabbalistic hubris. Because of this unremitting egocentrism, a stifling air of cerebral claustrophobia hangs ever heavier on the story. Bashevis sets out the theme of isolation in the very first line of the story:

Nokh yorn-lang opzitsn a farshlosener in a bazunder kheyderl afn gorn, un oysek zayn in kabole, hot shimen eyn mol in a shabes-tsu-nakhts medie geven zayn tatn, dem altn lomazer rebn, az er gezt avek in goles.²⁹

[After years sitting alone locked up in an isolated little room in the attic and busying himself with Kabbalah, Shimen let his father, the old Lomazer Rebbe, know that he was going away in redemptive exile.]

Shimen, the closet kabbalist, is a monadic version of Joseph della Reina lacking community and thereby vulnerable to the megalomaniac insanity to which he increasingly succumbs. This difference represents more than a mere contrast, however; it is the first in a series of inversions Bashevis makes of legendary themes out of R. Joseph della Reina.

The legendary predecessors to Shimen were, without exception, at the head of intimate kabbalistic conventicles and their mission dependent on cooperative mystical effort. R. Joseph della Reina's insanity coincides with the separation from his students. The bitterly misanthropic Shimen, on the other hand, is alone from the very outset as he walks step by step down the lonely road of his insanity. The story also inverts the source of warning against forcing the Redemption. The warning does not come from the heavenly messenger Elijah or angelic Sandalfon, but instead originates in the mundane source of Shimen's father. The Rabbi stands as a messenger of restraint and common sense who tells his son point blank that Lilith is behind his messianic fantasies. Two further thematic inversions help "ground" the story as well: the belt Shimen wishes to use in binding and strangulating Samael is not a donation from the celestials but a this-world inheritance from a Rabbi and the dogs to be overcome are not infernal hellhounds³⁰ but village mutts he bribes with bread.

Shimen's only vision comes in the form of a fast-induced nightmarish daydream in which his immanent demise is proclaimed by a fiery lion. The lion does not engage in dialogue with Shimen like the messengers of R. Joseph's tale, but accuses Shimen of defiling himself with women. This accusation is an obvious projection in Shimen's head of his own sexual guilt traceable back to his habit of locking himself in the women's gallery of the synagogue in order to study Kabbalah in solitude. Here he would smell the "*vayberishe shabes kleyder*"³¹ ["women's Sabbath clothes"], his encounter with a stray goat in the same space a symbol of his repressed carnal desire. When Shimen awakes in horror from the vision, he sees before him a very real sunset that silhouettes a windmill, alluding to the quixotic nature of the anti-hero's endeavor. Finally, it is not Samael who plays the trickster in this story, but Shimen who, in the confusion of his plan is convinced *he* must use "*takhbules*" or trickery in order to kill Samael.

The story is dominated by an overriding duality; this is not however the metaphysical split between the spiritual and physical realm as in R. Joseph della Reina's legend. It is instead a stark division between the unhappy reality of the *shtetl* and the phantasms of Shimen's deranged and solipsistic mind. Bashevis highlights both by juxtaposing painstakingly detailed naturalistic descriptions of Shimen's environment with his disjointed, mythic imaginings. These realistic descriptions hang like a weight around the neck of Shimen's redemptive quest, the reader being convinced that there is no hope at all for so wretched a world.

In spite of all resistance from the real world, Shimen's kabbalistic hubris continues to inflate until he finally comes to equate himself with God, a process which begins to reveal itself with the statement: "*Heyst es, az atik-yoymin hot zikh opgerukt un*

*leygt aroyf di gantse arbet af mir. moyre gekrign, he? az samoel geyt um un farshelt zikh gor far a zamdfirer, gey zikh dem nekhtikn tog!*³² [“Does that mean that the Ancient of Days³³ has pulled back and left the whole job to me. Scared, huh? If Samael goes around disguised as a sand carrier, go find the day after yesterday!"]. Shimen expresses a dry and rabid anger at God, in the course of which he blurts out an outrageously blasphemous interpretation of the doctrine of *zimzum*, saying that God retreated from the world not to make room for creation, as in traditional kabbalistic cosmology, but out of fear. Shimen questions the rule of the Almighty, but thinly veiled behind the mad anti-hero’s futile redemptive activism lies Bashevis’ own opinion of humanism as a deluded overestimation of human nature.

The next step in Shimen’s descent comes when he discovers a clue in the Zohar that Samael will be found on a certain day in the chaos of a *shtetl* marketplace. Shimen finally spots him in the figure of a grotesquely putrescent Christian beggar to whom Bashevis devotes an entire paragraph of unrelentingly nauseant description. The passage is a good example of the density of his descriptive prose in the story:

*Tsum sof hot er zikh tsugetshept tsu an altn betler ba der tifle: a kleyner, a geboygener in drayen, in a min geln katsapishn habelak biz tsu di borvese fis mit di tsedreyte finger, bavaksene mit grobe, kaylikhik-glate gulyes. a kop hot er gehat a breytn, a platshik-oysgekrokhenem, mit ibergeblibene flaksene herelekh, a simen af amolikn parkh. afn haldz hot er getrogn a sakh lange shnurn shvartse kreln, bazetst mit kuperne tslomim un bildlekh. anshtot a noz, hot ba im ge-hangen af tsvey bendlekh a shvarts flasterl, tif arayngezetst; anshtot oygn, zenen ba im geven tsvey kaylekhike, vild fleysh-royte, lekhlekh. dos opgesheylte, farkrimte, metsuredike moyl hot mit klole zikh getsoygn fun oyer tsu oyer, un s'iz derfun keseyder gerunen der gaver.*³⁴

[In the end he latched on to an old beggar near the church. Small and bent in three, in a sort of yellow Russian robe down to his bare feet with withered toes and covered with large, smoothly rounded tumors. His head was wide, flat

and bald with the remains of silky little hairs, a sign of past cankers. Around his neck he wore long strings of black beads, set with copper crosses and little icons. Instead of a nose, a deeply set black bandage hung by two ribbons of gauze. Instead of eyes there were two red, fleshy round holes. His peeling, leperous mouth was pulled with curses from ear to ear and a steady flow of saliva ran out of it.]

Shimen commences drawing a magic circle around the monstrosity while chanting random passages from the Zohar, having forgotten the appropriate Holy Names in his excitement. His murderous intentions are foiled, however, by local peasant thugs who beat him up and leave him in the street. Again Shimen's failure contrasts interestingly with that of R. Joseph della Reina. The latter was a capable kabbalist to the end, while Shimen proves himself nothing more than a deranged mystical bungler.

If Bashevis is indeed using the folly of Shimen and R. Joseph della Reina's messianism to satirize the secular messianic enthusiasts so prevalent in modern Yiddish culture, an interesting historical allegory can be drawn from Shimen's attempt to slaughter the beggar-Satan. In such an allegorical reading the beggar would stand as a figure of decrepit Tsarist Russia and its Orthodox religious underpinnings, while the peasants (one wearing a "huge sheepskin hat") would represent the various reactionary forces protecting the regime. Finally, Shimen would be the Jews of the revolution attempting to destroy the Tsarist moloch in their utopian zeal. Through the insertion of such an allegorical episode in the story Bashevis could simultaneously spew his venom at the cruelty of the Tsarist regime and voice his condemnation of the deceptive hopes of believers in the revolution.

However that may be, Shimen wakes up from his beating completely lost and seeing the world in hauntingly distorted and elongated expressionist visions. His insanity now complete,

Shimen stumbles “*barg arop*” or downhill in a slowed-down version of R. Joseph della Reina’s descent from Mount Seir and the latter’s suicidal fall. It is here, at the lowest point of an already groveling existence that Shimen finally meets, albeit unwittingly, his Samael in the form of an old rabbinic scholar in a bare room with his snorting nose over a sacred book. The hoary and hairy old Rabbi is an imposing, authoritative figure who curtly drills the bewildered Shimen with questions that compel him to express his deepest thoughts and motivations for the first time in many years. Shimen’s answers reveal the broken state of his internal world:

-- Neyn... dos.... kh'meyn tsu zogn, nisht tsu aykh bin ikh gekumen. ime ilo'o ligt gebunden mit ayzerne keytn un afn har-soir shpringen arum shvartse oksn. groys iz der partsef un nokh greser iz der horn vos vakst ba im af der noz. nisht ir hot a hasoge in azelkhe zakhn un nisht ir hot greyt di retsufim... ayerstalbn meg afile liles arumraytn afn khamer-hiyuli... veynik zenen do neshomes vos filn dem tsar derfun!³⁵

[No... that... I want to say, I have not come to you. The upper mother³⁶ lies bound in iron chains and on Mount Seir black oxen are jumping around. Large is the face and larger still is the horn which grows on his nose. You neither comprehend such things nor do you have ready the mystical combinations... For all you care even Lilith can ride around on the hylic donkey... few are those who feel the pain of this thing!]

The mention of the *Shekhinah* bound in chains on Mt. Seir not only shows that Shimen still holds on to his redemptive quest, but also that his imagination continues to be dominated by the legend of R. Joseph della Reina. The horn growing on the ox’s snout marks the return of his sexual guilt and his claim that others do not feel the pain of exile like he does himself, establishes that his egocentrism is still intact. Thus the story ends where it begins with Shimen, lost in his messianic hubris, unable to accept the authority of a father figure. When the Rabbi asks Shimen who he is, he is taken aback and replies: “*Ikh... kh'heys in gantsn nisht. nishto far mayn nomen keyn oysies... ikh... kh'gedenk nisht. kh'veys aleytn nisht. kh'bin a farborgener un farhoylener.*”³⁷

["I... I am not called anything. There are no letters for my name... I... I can't remember. I am a hidden one and a concealed one."] Shimen here projects onto himself the fundamental attributes of the Jewish God, unnamable and hidden. Unlike R. Joseph della Reina who had a spiritual other in the form of Samael to whom he eventually offers the incense, Shimen's object of idolatrous worship is his own pitiful self with which he has replaced the divine.

During the encounter with the old scholar, Bashevis adds one final, very dramatic touch of R. Joseph della Reina to Shimen's story as the anti-hero, "already a corpse,"³⁸ is about to wander into the final darkness of his insanity. As Shimen talks, the Rabbi slowly fills the room with tobacco smoke from his pipe, tugging at it with ever increasing vigor. Tobacco as a modernized form of the incense offered by R. Joseph della Reina to Samael can be found in Bashevis' 1966 short story *Di soydes fun kabole: a memuar* [The Secrets of Kabbalah: A Memoir].³⁹ And indeed the Rabbi's smoke hints that Shimen is not only meeting his Samael, but an incarnation of R. Joseph della Reina himself, alone and on the outskirts of town in accord with the traditions of the legend. Shimen meets an authentic version of what he had aspired to become, thereby exposing the nature of his idolatry. Like the wandering Jew, denied death and forced to attest to a past failing for all time, R. Joseph della Reina sends Shimen off to his dark demise as one who had learned the dangers of messianic activism through hard experience. Unlike the wandering Jew of Christian tradition, however, this R. Joseph della Reina like all of Bashevis' della Reinas, is not so punished because he failed to recognize the Messiah, but because he believed he would come at all.

By the time Bashevis published *Der yid fun bov*⁴⁰ ("The Jew from Babylon") some years after *Afn oylem-hatoy-e*, the author had replaced Shimen's pathological and psychological devils

with a sovereign demonic realm out to take revenge on the story's anti-hero, Yoyets-bar-metsliekh. Yoyets, an extremely ugly, isolated and decrepit old man, has throughout his long life utilized magic knowledge to drive out demons. His powers now exhausted, the story finds Yoyets surrounded by the host of hell seeking vengeance for past affronts. Once again Bashevis' heroic villain is associated with Sabbatianism as rumors spread amongst the wary that he ventures out alone every Friday to await the false Messiah. Many of the signs Bashevis pins to the character of R. Joseph della Reina and familiar from the stories discussed previously appear again here as well: Eastern dress, black cats, and a windmill ("like a gallows") to name a few. Indeed at the end of the story Yoyets shares R. Joseph della Reina's unfortunate fate, falling from a great height:

Tsumorgns hot men im gefunen lign mitn ponem arop af a leydikn plats nisht vayt fun der moyer. der kop iz geven ayngegrobn in zamd, hent-un-fis -- tsheshpreyt, vi er volt aropgefaln fun a groyser hoykh.⁴¹

[In the morning they found him lying with his face down in an empty place not far from the city wall. His head was buried in sand, hands and feet spread wide as if he had fallen from a great height].

Unique to Yoyets-bar-Metstliekh's incarnation of R. Joseph della Reina is the christological foundation of his character. His unusual first name "Yoyets" literally meaning "counselor," but is more importantly a direct allusion to the "*pele yoyets*" or "wonderful counselor" of Isaiah 9:5,⁴² a verse central to Christian arguments in defense of the Nazarene as the promised Messiah. In the tradition of *Sefer Toldot Yeshu*,⁴³ the traditional Jewish biography of Jesus, Bashevis portrays his Jesus as a magician, the author linking the kabbalistic and messianic magic of R. Joseph della Reina with the Christian Messiah.

Bashevis establishes the connection when he gives a Jesus-type description of the young Yoyets complete with a patrilineal priestly pedigree like that of the Nazarene in Matthew chapter 1: *Mit a yor draysik tsurik hot er zikh bavizn in poyln -- a hoykher, a darer, in a lang malbesh mit gele un vaysen pasn, in sandaln, vos hobn oysgezen vi khalitse-shikh, un mit a vaysn gartl af di lendn.*⁴⁴ [About thirty years ago he appeared in Poland -- tall and thin in a long robe with yellow and white stripes, in sandals which looked like Levirate shoes⁴⁵ and with a white sash on his hips.] Since the “*khalitse-shikh*” mentioned are a traditional sign of release from obligation, the specific mention in this context reminds the reader of what Bashevis saw as the undesirable antinomian trajectory of Jesus of Nazareth and his counterpart in the story, Yoyets bar Matsliekh. Jesus never married, while Yoyets scared off the wives he had.

Like Jesus, Yoyets is a healer and the house he has been called to cleanse of evil spirits in the *shtetl* Bilgoray near Lublin has “large yellow spots like a leper.” Yoyets heals many of the same ailments conjured away by Reb Gedaliya in *Sotn in goray* -- a child who has lost speech, for example-- but Bashevis leaves no doubt about the specifically christological nature of Yoyets’s other “miracles”. Allusions to Gospel stories lend Yoyets’s figure a dimension not to be found in the pompous and worldly Reb Gedaliya:

*Der yid hot geheyilt falike un meshugoim, aroysgetribn dibukim un more-shkhoyres. er hot in a shvaritsn shpigl gevizn geshtaltn fun geshtorbene kroyvim un ibergetrogn krenk fun mentshn af hener... oybvoyl er hot zikh gefirt frum, iz gegangn in mikves un gefast taneysim, hobn rabonim un tsadikim im geroydeft ...*⁴⁶

[The man healed epileptics and madmen, he drove out dybbuks and melancholy spirits. He revealed the spirits of dead relatives in a black mirror and transferred sicknesses from people to roosters... even though he maintained the practice of piety, going to the ritual bath and fasting fasts, Rabbis and pious men persecuted him...]

Every ailment healed is a direct allusion to the Christian testament and Yoyets even perpetrates a magical resurrection of Lazarus as he channels a dead man through a black mirror. Just as Lazarus had been the brother of Mary Magdalene,⁴⁷ it is a deceased relative conjured by the Jew from Babylon. Bashevis completes the picture as he describes the masses swarming to receive help from a weary Yoyets as he works to rid the house of its demons. Of special interest is the allusion to Mark 5:1-20 where Jesus sends the demon Legion into a heard of pigs. The latter, evidently not a kosher practice, Yoyets sends the spirits into hens instead. This subtly humorous allusion points to another central theme of the story which relates directly to Bashevis' own vegetarian "dogma" and his sensitivity toward cruelty to animal life:

Even though I don't have any dogma, this has become my dogma. I have convinced myself that as long as we are going to be cruel to animals, as long as we are going to apply towards animals the principle that might makes right, I think that the Higher Powers will apply the same principle to us. This is lately my kind of religion, and I really hope that one day humanity will make an end to this eating of meat and hunting of animals for pleasure.⁴⁸

For Bashevis it did not matter whether roosters or swine were victimized by the exorcised demons of Yoyets and Jesus; both revealed mankind's callous dominion over nature, a serious ethical lapse in the author's eyes. Indeed, Bashevis puts the lion's share of blame on the exorcist and not the exorcised. Yoyets's existence is one of complete alienation from and magical aggression toward nature. In response, things natural (barking dogs and gnawing mice) haunt him equally as much as his metaphysical tormentors. The horse which pulls him to Bilgoray at the beginning of the story stands as an animal prophet of doom, Yoyets foreseeing his own demise in the "broken moonlight" reflecting from the horse's black eyes.

In a wrenching and vividly detailed description, the author exposes the cold cruelty of magical practice as a black cat is burned alive: “*Di kats hot men gebundn, zi arayngeleygt in a groysn vesh-top, ongeleygt af ir heltser, bagosn mit naft un untergetsundn.*”⁴⁹ [“He bound the cat, laid her in a large wash pot, covered her with pieces of wood, dowsed her with kerosene and set her on fire.”] In line with Bashevis’ previously mentioned renderings of R. Joseph’s della Reina’s incense offering to Satan, the smoky forms which arise with terrifying feminine groans and curses emanating from the burning cat can be read as another allusion to R. Joseph’s idolatry. Indeed, this scene describes the very moment that the tragic hero of folklore is closest to victory over the bound Samael. Bashevis’ description of Yoyets’s magical practice is a lucid and captivating description of how the author imagined the encounter of R. Joseph della Reina with Samael on Mt. Seir:

S’hot gezetst a shvartser feter roykh, geflokhtn zikh, vi a tsop... bam yid fun bovl hot in dem eynem ofenem oyg opgeglantst a shayn fun fayer. hent un fis hobn zikh im gevorf, vi in kadokhes, un a shoym iz aroys ibern moyl. er hot zikh ongeshpart af zayn shtekn, kedey nisht anidertsufaln, ayngeloygn zikh. di kats -- a farkoylte -- iz gevorn toplt lang. der farsarfeter veydl hot shtayf geshtart aroyf, dem kleynem kop tsuzamen mit di fodershte fis hot zi tsugedrukt tsum dno, vi tsum letsn shprung... tsvishn di lange rays-tseyen hot aroysgehongen a farbrente tsung...⁵⁰

[A thick, black smoke arose and wound itself like a braid... in the Jew from Babylon’s one good eye reflected a fiery shine. His hands and feet flung wildly as if in a seizure and foam poured out over his mouth. He supported himself on his cane to keep from falling, he bent over. The cat -- burned to coals -- doubled in length. The scorched tail stuck up straight, the small head together with the front feet pressed against the bottom as if ready for a final pounce... a burnt tongue hung out between the long front teeth...]

Yoyets lives as alienated from the eternal feminine as he did from his past wives and the bound and burnt feline will indeed make a final pounce; one directed at the very life and soul of

the magician. His demise comes in the form of an infernal wedding as he, like R. Joseph della Reina before him, becomes a “lover of Lilith.”⁵¹ Unlike Joseph della Reina, however, Yoyets is an unwilling groom and Bashevis reintroduces a trace of the tragic into the story in a new form as the author evokes in the reader a slight sense of pathos for this R. Joseph della Reina.

Yoyets is an active resister of evil from the beginning, who early in life made the choice to fight the devil with his own weapons. He is not a crazed megalomaniac like Shimen, but is rather a character who takes on magic activism out of strong ethical conviction. The humane benevolence of his christlike deeds add to his tragedy as they prove themselves futile against the eternal realm of evil. Yoyets, unlike so many other R. Joseph della Reinas in Bashevis’ work has a strong sense of humility and pursues what he sees as the good somewhat within limits and without delusions of messianic grandeur. In fact, thoughts of Redemption never penetrate the depths of Yoyets’s melancholy. His end comes, nonetheless, in a manner similar to the demented Shimen before him, following as it does a head to head encounter with rabbinic authority -- the Bilgoray Rabbi viciously condemns his life work and sends him away to his confused and chaotic doom.

Two other short but telling examples of the legend of R. Joseph della Reina in Bashevis’ work warrant mention. The first comes in the bawdy tragi-comedy of Tsirl bas Royze-Glike in one of Bashevis’ most popular tales, *Der shpigl: a monolog fun a shed*⁵² (“The Mirror: a demon’s monologue”). The story of this feminine Faust is perhaps familiar enough. Tsirl, spoiled by luxury and weakened by vanity, lust and Heine’s *Liederbuch* (sic), is seduced by an imp. She actively makes the magical step into the mirror of her “boudoir” in hopes of a metaphysical sexual adventure but ends up in the clutches of eternal damnation. As Tsirl

succumbs to the sadism of hell at the story's end, her seducer muses poetically on her demise. In the course of these reflections he makes a curious wordplay on the name of R. Joseph della Reina:

Un ikh, muktse ben pigl, zits vayter in a shpigl, loysh un loyer af a frish vaybl, a korbm farn tayvl. vi zogt yosef dela reyne: m'varft nisht aroys s'umreyne vi lang s'iz nishto s'reyne. Got iz a teyke un a sofek sfeyke. di sitre akhre iz khaloshes, ober zi hot mamoshes. bore vesheme, iz beser der bore. kh'hob gelernt in kheyder un ken gemore...⁵³

[And I, Untouchable son of Abomination, continue to sit in a mirror, eavesdropping and lurking after a fresh woman, a prey for the Devil. As Joseph della Reina says: one does not throw away impurity as long as there is no purity. God is debatable and very doubtful matter. The company of Satan may be nausea, but they are reality. Between "sure" and "perhaps" "sure" is better. I have studied in *kheder* and know the Talmud.]⁵⁴

Once again R. Joseph della Reina finds his name wound up with heretical traditions of beatific sin and the necessity of impurity. This time the association comes directly out of the combination of his name and a folksaying as Bashevis' devil replaces the Sephardic meaning "queen" (Reina, which is pronounced "Reyne" in Yiddish) with the Yiddish word "pure" ("reyne"). In adding the negating prefix "um" the author uses his imp to propagate his predominant interpretation of the legendary figure as *R. yosef dela umreyne*, or R. Joseph the Unclean.

In a more serious vein, Bashevis mobilizes a motif from the legend of R. Joseph della Reina in his short story *Mishnayas* ("Mishnah").⁵⁵ The story of Reb Yisroel Valden's final hours is filled with both the tragedy of old age and the quiet beauty of a life of study. The old talmudist shares a house with the revolutionary generation of his grandchildren and finds it invaded by "...*sharlatahes, komunistn, oder ver veyst vos'er parshoynen.*"⁵⁶ ["...charlatans, communists and

who knows what other riffraff.”] He passively accepts the din of his surroundings, quietly reflecting on the eternal truths of traditional rabbinic literature, the letters of which begin to transform themselves into colorful visions.

His thoughts, broken by the frailty of old age, go from the sacred books, to the crowded room and then into visions of the Holy Land filled with images from his book world. He recalls a dream to spend his last years in Jerusalem, but these hopes have long since been dashed by the death of his wife and economic decline. The secularized youth who surround him have not only invaded his living space, they have equally intruded on this cherished dream. As Reb Yisroel reflects on these lost hopes, a motif from the legend of R. Joseph della Reina enters his mind:

Ober der mentsh denkt un got lenkt. nisht reb yisoel hot atsind af hatsoes, nisht dem koyekh. akhuts dem bazetsn zikh gor in yene mekoymes di voyle yungen. reb yisroel hot kvenklidik getsoygn a halb oysgekrokhene peye. vu s'rut di kdushe, zukht di sitre akhre an onhaltenish. vil batsvingen di malke bam kenig in palats. ober dos aleyv vos di khitsoynim raysn zikh ahin, iz a tseykhn az s'dernentert zikh der kets...⁵⁷

[Still, men plan but God steers. Reb Yisroel no longer had the means, nor did he have the strength. Besides, this rabble was even setting itself up in the Holy Land of all places. Reb Yisroel hesitantly pulled at his thinning sidelock. Wherever sanctity rests, the *sitra ahra* looks for a toehold. It wants to overcome the Queen in the palace of the King. Still, the fact alone that the heretics were invading the place must be a sign that the Redemption was drawing near.]

Bashevis alludes once again to R. Joseph della Reina's legendary abduction of the queen, but this time he wishes to express the pious Reb Yisroel's condemnation of early twentieth century Zionism as a secular attempt to force the Redemption and his own rejection of the "eschatological-Zionist perspective."⁵⁸ As Dan Miron has pointed out, "a Jewish-Zionist vantage point will have to struggle with Bashevis' work" -- as will utopian projections of any kind.

The very depth and authenticity of Bashevis' pessimism makes a reading of the maestro's work at a level which transcends mere gothic fascination or simple *Schadenfreude* a highly disturbing experience. It has become clear through the twists and turns of this thesis that the figure of R. Joseph della Reina stands as an icon of this pessimism and where his name appears Bashevis' Schopenhauerean mood reigns supreme. As the author states in his fictional autobiography:

Ikh hob, vi Schopenhauer, geton a blik hintern forhang fun der dershaynung, ikh hob gekhapt dem veltviln ba der arbet, gezen zayne fortlen, zayne opnarerishe shtik, zayn falshn optimizm, un ver s'hot dos gezen, kon shoyner nisht firn keyn normal lebn. ikh hob faktish eyn ideal: zitsn ergets in a shtub ful mit bikher un lernen, shtudirn, shraybn.⁵⁹

[Like Schopenhauer I had seen behind the veil of appearances and caught the will of the world at work. I had seen its ruses, its deceitful tricks, its false optimism and once anyone has seen this he could no longer lead a normal existence. I had but one ideal: to sit in a room somewhere full of books and learn, study, write.]

With much of his worldview rooted in the arch-pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer, Bashevis saw the world as a witch's brew of chaos and history as a directionless carriage of misery. In his later works there is a softening of the pessimism, however, and the ideal he mentions at the end of the passage plays a large role in it. In Schopenhauer's essay "On Human Nature," Bashevis possibly found that "the virtue of a shoemaker is to make good shoes," and indeed one of his later and more "idyllic" stories is entitled "The Little Shoemakers."⁶⁰ It is in the return to his traditional and hard-won craft that the quiet hero of this story finds meaning in the displacement of immigration, just as Bashevis himself found it in his art. Nonetheless, Bashevis' rather Buddhistic protagonist, faced with the irresistibly destructive nature of history and the universe,

is perhaps as much under the sign of futility as are the author's myriad incarnations of R. Joseph della Reina.

Notes

¹ Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1943), 199.

² The original Yiddish version appeared as *Der sotn in goray* in serialized form in *Globus*, 1933. The first book edition was published in Warsaw, 1935. Bashevis Singer introduced emendations and corrections under the extended title *Der sotn in goray: a mayse fun fartsaytns*. (New York: Farlag matones, 1943). The Yiddish quotes are all taken from the 1943 edition. The English quotes are taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray*, trans. Jacob Sloan. (New York: Noonday Press, 1955).

³ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Chmielnicki, Bogdan."

⁴ *Der sotn in goray*, 161.

⁵ *Satan in Goray*, 201.

⁶ Concerning dogs and Jews of the *shtetl* Singer wrote, "The *shtetl* was full of animals, mostly poultry: chickens, geese, ducks; occasionally a home had a calf or a goat. Cats were the only popular house pets, often given Jewish names and spoken to in Yiddish. Dogs, because of their temper and readiness to bite, were considered non-Jewish and were seldom found in Jewish homes." Bashevis, as a rule highly sensitive to animal sensibility, surprisingly attributes Jewish alienation from dogs to canine nature, when in fact dogs were often trained by anti-Semitic masters to attack Jews by singling out their habit of dress. Abraham Shulman. *The Old Country*. Forward by Isaac Bashevis Singer (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1974), 6.

⁷ *Sotn in goray*, 119.

⁸ *Satan in Goray*, 145-6.

⁹ For more on Sandalfon's roles in Jewish angelology see Moshe Idel. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 85n.

¹⁰ *Sotn in goray*, 125.

¹¹ *Satan in Goray*, 154.

¹² *Yidishe folksmayses un legendes: tvayter band, ershte heft*. "R. yosef dela reyne." Collected by Sh. Bastomski (Vilna: Farlag 'di naye yidishe folksshul', 1926), 15.

¹³ *Yidishe folksmayses*, 7-8.

¹⁴ From this point on all unnoted translations are my own.

¹⁵ *Yidishe folksmayses*, 8.

¹⁶ *Sotn in goray*, 126-7.

¹⁷ *Satan in Goray*, 155.

¹⁸ Dan Miron. "Passivity and Narration: the Spell of Bashevis Singer." In *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996), 150.

¹⁹ Gershom Scholem. *Kabbalah* (New York, Dorset, 1974), 287.

²⁰ *Forverts*, Oct. 25, 1935, 7.

²¹ *Forverts*, Oct. 26, 1935, 9.

²² Yitskhok Bashevis. "Afn oylem-hatoy-e," *Di Yidishe velt: khoydesh-shrift far literatur, kritik, kunst un kultur, n. 1* (Warsaw: April, 1928), 54. I am using a reprint found in *Di goldene keyt* 124 (1988), 87-95.

²³ David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: the lost art of Yiddish storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 276.

²⁴ Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), s.v. "kets," *kuf - lange tsadek*.

²⁵ Brown, Driver and Briggs. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907).

²⁶ Bastomski's version gives a much more detailed account of R. Joseph's ascent and descent, both directions full of levels, each with its own obstacles to be overcome.

²⁷ *Afn oylem-hatoy-e*, 88.

²⁸ To this point the translation taken from Roskies, 276.

²⁹ *Afn oylem-hatoy-e*, 87.

³⁰ The motif of a troop of black dogs as one of the obstacles to be overcome in R. Joseph's quest is found in Bastomski's version of the legend. *Yidishe folksmayses*, 13.

³¹ *Afn oylem-hatoy-e*, 89.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ A term whose meaning is not clear but has been traditionally interpreted as an epithet for the Divine. In the biblical context the term is only found three times, all of them in Daniel 7. Its use in Daniel 7:13 is rife with messianic overtones: "And I looked on, in the night vision, One like a human being Came with the clouds of heaven; He reached the Ancient of Days And was presented to Him. Dominion, glory, and kingship were given to him; All peoples and nations of every language must serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, And his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed." (JPS).

³⁴ *Afn oylem-hatoy-e*, 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁶ The "ime ilo'o" (upper mother) to which Shimen refers is taken from an erotic passage found in Zohar I, 247b: "'Unto (ad) the desire of the hills of the world" (Genesis 49:26). This *ad* (unto) is the desire of the hills of the world. What are they? Two females, one above and one below, each one of whom is called "a world." The desire of every part of the body is in those two mothers: desire for the child from the upper mother, and a desire to be united in the lower mother." Bashevis uses the zoharic tradition to help outline Shimen's Oedipus complex.

³⁷ *Afn oylem-hatoy-e*, 94.

³⁸ A possible allusion to Rashi's commentary on Genesis 11:32: "Scripture calls him [Terakh] dead, for the wicked even during their life-time are called dead; but the righteous, even when they are dead are called alive..." *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary: A Linear translation*. "Genesis", trans. Rabbi Abraham ben Isaiah and Rabbi Benjamin Sharfman (Brooklyn, NY: S.S. & R, 1949).

³⁹ The reference to R. Joseph della Reina comes as two school boys are playing their favorite game of fabricating fantastic lies for one another. One of the boys, an autobiographical Singer, starts the dialogue and is quickly challenged by his friend: "-- *Az ikh'l vern elter, vel ikh krign reshus ba etye-novi tsu flien keyn erets-yisroel. ikh'l zikh bazetsn in a khurve un brengen meshiekh. -- vest hobn dem sof fun yoysef dela reyne... -- ikh'l nisht gebn dem sotn tsu shmekn ka' tabak...*" ["-- When I grow up I will get permission from Elijah the Prophet to fly to the Land of Israel, I'll move into a ruin and bring the Messiah." "-- You'll end up like R. Joseph della Reina." "-- I won't give Satan any tobacco to sniff..."] Yitskhok Bashevis Singer. *Di soydes fun kabole* in the collection *Der shpigl un andere dertseylungen*. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975), 274-5.

⁴⁰ *Globus*, n. 2 (July [i.e. August], 1932), 17-27. I am using a reprinting of *Der yid fun bovl* found in *Der sotn in goray: a mayse fun fartsayns un andere dertseylungen* (New York: *Farlak matones*, 1943), 309-19.

⁴¹ *Der yid fun bovl*, 319.

⁴² "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulders: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor [*yoyets*], The mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." KJV.

⁴³ Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus," in *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 45.

⁴⁴ *Der yid fun bovl*, 310.

⁴⁵ Levirate marriage between a widow whose husband died without offspring and the brother of the deceased as prescribed by Deut. 25:5-6. In order for the levir not to marry his sister-in-law the ceremony of halizah is required. In this ritual the Levir wears a special shoe, the "h.s." on his right foot and the sister in law removes the shoe to symbolizes that the Levir has been freed from his obligation .
⁴⁶ *Bovl*, 310.

⁴⁷ John 11:1-44.

⁴⁸ Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 65.

⁴⁹ *Der yid fun bovl*, 314.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Joseph della Reina."

⁵² *Di goldene keyt*, 26 (1956), 131-8.

⁵³ *Der shpigl*, 138.

⁵⁴ Translation from Judith Nysenholc, "A Demon's Poetic and Sacreligious Philosophy: What is lost in the translation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Der Shpigl". *Yiddish*, vol. 9, no.2 (1994), 38.

⁵⁵ In *Gimpl tam un andere dertseylungen* (New York: Cyco, 1963), 265-74.

⁵⁶ *Mishnayes*, 265.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵⁸ *Miron Passivity*, 151.

⁵⁹ Yitskhok Bashevis, *Mayn tats bez-din-shtub: hemsheykhim zamlung* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 287.

⁶⁰ Ruth Wisse. "Singer's Paradoxical Progress" in *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996), 102.

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