

Messiah ben Joseph of Tishevits

The coming of the Messiah is no simple matter. According to tradition, the first to appear will be Messiah the son of Joseph, who will fight all the forces of evil. Only when he is victorious will Messiah the son of David bring true peace. In each generation, there are two righteous men, one who deserves to become Messiah ben Joseph and the other - Messiah ben David.

In the old cemetery in Tishevits there is a tombstone that reads: HERE LIES BURIED THE RIGHTEOUS MAN ELYOKUM SON OF SHMUEL ... followed by the date 1559 or 1572. Either way, he lived at the same time as Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great kabbalist of Safed, in the Land of Israel.

One Friday, so the story goes, word got around in the town of Tishevits that a poor Jewish tailor had died; not a tailor exactly, but a latnik, a mender of old clothes. The Burial Society got to work at once so that he could be buried before the Sabbath. To their amazement, they reached his hut only to find two elegantly dressed visitors, obviously noblemen, who would not allow them to approach the dead man. "He is a saintly Jew," they proclaimed.

The rabbi of Tishevits was called in. He worked out a compromise whereby the Burial Society which always took care of such matters, would prepare the shrouds and the coffin, carry it to the cemetery and perform the burial. Each member of the Society would bathe beforehand in the ritual bath as is the custom when a saintly person is buried. As for the two noble guests, they would prepare the body itself by cleansing and dressing it in the shrouds. And so it was.

Later, the Rabbi of Tishevits invited the two guests to his home and asked them who they were. They told him that their teacher the ARI, R. Isaac Luria of Safed, was told by the heavens that the two great rabbis of the time, the MAHARSHAL of Lublin and the RAMO of Cracow had decided to excommunicate him, the ARI of Safed. On a certain Sunday both rabbis were to blow the shofar in their separate synagogues and announce to the Jews of Poland that the ARI was an outcast for having introduced a new and dangerous approach to the Kabbalah. As soon as he learned of the plan, the

ARL sent his two disciples to Lublin to persuade the MAHARSHAL to change his mind and to have him convince the younger RAMO as well.

As it was getting late, the Rabbi of Tishevits interrupted their story and invited them to spend the Sabbath with him.

"Impossible," replied the guests, "we must spend the Sabbath in Lublin at the home of the MAHARSHAL."

"What?" asked the rabbi in astonishment. "Lublin is almost 200 km away!"

The older of the two, rabbi Hazzim Vital by name, explained that the ARL had ordered a special cloud to bring them. That morning they had boarded the cloud in Safed and in the same way they would reach Lublin in no time. "You must excuse us right now. We are in a hurry," said R. Vital, "but we promise to send you an explanation from Lublin."

R. Hazzim Vital was true to his word. From Lublin he sent the Rabbi of Tishevits the following account which was recorded in the community register pinkes, the town chronicle:

"One day I, Hazzim Vital, asked my teacher to tell me who of the living was worthy of being Messiah ben Joseph (I did not ask him who was Messiah ben David, since I was certain that it is none other than Isaac Luria himself). The ARL ^{replied} answered:

"I have orders from heaven to answer all your wishes. Therefore, I beg you to hold your peace. The man in question is a hidden saint and I would endanger his life if I were to reveal his identity."

"I persisted, however, and the ARL finally promised to tell me when the proper time came. The opportunity arose unexpectedly when the ARL sent me and another messenger to Lublin. The ARL told us to stop over in Tishevits, a town in the Lublin Province where we would find the man worthy of being Messiah ben Joseph. If we found him at home there was no danger.

"Can you imagine my joy? Here I was to meet the Messiah ben Joseph! But alas, when we arrived in Tishevits, the saintly man was not at home, but at the mikva, bathing for the Sabbath. When he finally did return, he greeted us in silence, washed his hands,

removed some straw from his mattress, spread it out over the floor,
lay down upon it with his feet facing the door end — died.

"The ARI's fears were well-founded. Yet another generation
must pass without a redeemer."

from Pinkas Tishevit ed. Jacob Zipper
Tel Aviv 1970, pp. 52-55.

Pinke Tishevits ed. by Jacob
Zipper (Tel-Aviv, 1970) 52-56.

The Messiah's grave was encircled with a white lime and no one dared enter the circle and approach the tombstone. Khasidic Rabbis who visited our town would stretch out on the ground and pray next to his grave. Then they would approach the grave in their socks and place a kvitl, a note, on the tombstone with the help of a twig: the note would be attached to the end of the twig.

Yekhiel Shtern Kheyder un besmedresh
(N.Y. 1950) p. 99.