

## Introduction

*Following the Jewish Messiah Turned Muslim,  
1666–1862*

### The Conversion of Rabbi Shabbatai Tzevi

We can trace the origins of the Dönme to a single event on a single day. On October 16, 1666, Rabbi Shabbatai Tzevi, who numerous Jews from northern Europe to southern Yemen believed was the messiah, converted to Islam before the presence of Ottoman Sultan Mehmet IV in the New Pavilion of the Royal Palace in Edirne in eastern Thrace. Ottoman chronicles from that time allow us to reconstruct what occurred before the gaze of the sultan:

§ The twenty-five-year-old with hazel eyes outlined with kohl gazes down unobserved from a latticed window upon the meeting of his ministers in his palace in the frontier capital.<sup>1</sup> Sultan Mehmet IV is immaculately dressed, although no one can see him. On top of an embroidered gold inner garment, he wears a spotted violet and gold embroidered cloak, on his head a simple cylinder wrapped in fine white cloth, with a green emerald the size of half an egg as an aigrette. He prefers to be out hunting in the forest, not sitting in this tower. But the extraordinary situation deserves his attention.

Under his gaze, are several men sitting around a very large red velvet divan. The black-bearded, short-sighted, and overweight grand vizier Fazıl Ahmet Pasha is on campaign against the infidels in the west.<sup>2</sup> In his place is the deputy grand vizier, Mustafa Pasha, dressed in a white satin coat covered in sable fur and a two-foot high turban composed of a cylinder-shaped base, around which he has wrapped a white muslin cloth, ornamented by a red cloth at the tip. Sitting next to him is the leading Muslim religious authority in the empire, SheikhuIslam Minkarizade

Yahya Efendi, who is recognizable by his more simple white fur. The Kurdish Imperial Preacher Vani Mehmet Efendi sits farthest away from the others, at the edge of the divan. In his captivating voice, he interrogates a thick bearded, owl-faced, humble, turban-wearing forty-year old rabbi from Izmir.

“The Jewish traitors believe you are a prophet!”<sup>3</sup>

God forbid! The sultan can not believe this. It’s preposterous! While his brave and pious warriors are struggling to conquer the last infidel holdout on Crete, the Venetian fortress of Candia (now Heraklion), Jews have ceased work and flocked to the side of this rebel, who has declared that he and not his eminence should rule the imperial dominions. How could he dare contradict the fact that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets? The rabbi had been banished to a fortress, but the Jews also gathered there. Since according to their false beliefs, their saying “This is our prophet” had begun to disturb the peace, his eminence had been compelled to summon the rabbi.

Knowing that his execution is certain, the rabbi, who alternated between ecstatic bouts of enthusiasm and devastating fits of anguish and suffering,<sup>4</sup> seems to be in the latter mood. With dull eyes, he declares in a monotone, through barely parted lips, “all the nonsense said about me is not true.”

Quickly, the Imperial Preacher interjects, “In that case, why don’t you become a Muslim? After this council there is no possibility of escape: either come to the faith, or you will be immediately put to death. Become a Muslim at last, and we shall intercede for you with our gracious sultan.”

The sultan observes that “the rabbi, with the guidance of God, the King who forgives, at that time became shown the right path, ennobled with the light of faith and a believer responsible to God. He deemed that from his exalted graciousness, a salaried position at the Middle Gate valued at 150 silver coins was proper for him.” Having made the fake prophet accept the true prophet, the sultan slips out of the tower, changes into his riding clothes, mounts his horse, and pursues the chase. Mehmet IV thinks that he has converted the messianic claimant into a proselytizing force for Islam. But the aims of the converter and the converted are not always the same.

Faced with the stark choice of converting to Islam or martyrdom, Shabbatai Tzevi chose to change his religion. Since most Ottoman Jews traced their origins to Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had either converted or faced the choice of converting, his decision was not that shocking. Nonetheless, it split his followers into three groups. Most lost faith in

him and returned, alienated, to normative Judaism. The German Jewish writer Glückel of Hameln, mother of twelve children, compared the letdown to suffering through nine months of pregnancy and birth pains only to break wind.<sup>5</sup> A second group, the Shabbateans, remained Jews, but furtively maintained their faith in Shabbatai Tzevi's messiahship. They placed special emphasis on Purim, mentioned in two of his commandments, for this Jewish festival celebrates Esther, the queen whose passing as a non-Jew allowed her to be in a position to save all the Jews of the Persian Empire. As late as the eighteenth century, their descendants continued to believe that Shabbatai Tzevi was a prophet and to practice the rituals he had taught. What polemical literature exists between followers of Shabbatai Tzevi and Jews were composed by this group and their opponents as they both sought to come to terms with what the messiahship of Shabbatai Tzevi meant for Jewish theology and Judaism.<sup>6</sup> Many important rabbis in Salonika, Edirne, Amsterdam, London, and Ancona were secret Shabbateans,<sup>7</sup> but the sect had disappeared by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

For one group, however, the radical failure of their messiah ironically led, not to disappointment and despair, but confirmation, renewed confidence, and the ecstasy of knowing that one cannot know the mysteries of God's chosen.<sup>8</sup> After all, "if his followers could believe him when he moved the Sabbath from Friday to Monday, abolished holidays, and emancipated women and let them be called to read from the Torah, then why not believe him when he said 'there is no God, but God'"<sup>9</sup> and Muhammad is God's messenger. Since the forced conversions of Jews in inquisitory Spain and Portugal normalized cryptofaith performance among Jews and promoted the inverse construction of reality, Jewish messiahs had arisen who elevated their intentions over their acts, including conversion to another religion.<sup>10</sup> Many prophets of and later followers of Shabbatai Tzevi were conversos, involuntary Iberian converts, for whom messianism, and above all, the appearance of a converso messiah was so important.<sup>11</sup> What is unique in this case is how this group of Jews set off on a new historical path, forging an ethno-religious identity outside the boundaries of Judaism and Jewishness.

Because he was a converso messiah, one might wish to argue that Shabbatai Tzevi's conversion was not profound, in the sense that it was not based on profound belief in Islam, and that rather, it was quite superficial, because he had been compelled to change religion. However, the profundity

of his conversion lay rather in the way he explained what he had done: conversion was a temporary punishment for Jews for failing to recognize the true God that Shabbatai Tzevi had discovered. This third group of followers redoubled their messianic belief by also converting to Islam. They found ample justification in Judaism for this double play. Moses, after all, with whom Shabbatai Tzevi compared himself, remained for a long time in disguise in Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Shabbatai Tzevi's order not to intermarry with Muslims is a near-literal rendering of a passage from the corpus of Jewish law, the Talmud.<sup>13</sup> As Meir Benayahu concluded after having studied the treatises of the first Dönme and their opponents, "But their religion was not the religion of Islam. . . . They became Muslim, but not in order to fulfill its commandments and believe in its faith, rather . . . to effect divine restoration."<sup>14</sup> This was a case of apostasy for the sake of redemption. One had to become a Muslim to initiate the process of repairing the order of the universe to the way it had been prior to Creation and the breaking of the vessels that had contained the sparks of God's emanation.

The followers of Shabbatai Tzevi who believed it necessary to appear to become Muslims, consisting of two to three hundred families (i.e., 1,000 to 1,500 people), converted to Islam in the first few decades after his conversion, but they continued to believe in his messianic calling and his religious beliefs and practices, which emerged at the intersection of Kabbalah and Sufism. They coalesced first in Edirne and then, by 1683, in Salonika, where the major mosques had originally been churches, converted after the conquest of the city by the Ottomans in 1430. By the time of Shabbatai Tzevi's messianic calling, the city was renowned for its Sufis, who followed the path of Mevlana, Jalal ad-Din Rumi;<sup>15</sup> as a haven for conversos; and as a center of Kabbalah and rabbinic scholarship. Since the early sixteenth century, it had had a Jewish majority.<sup>16</sup> Ottoman Salonika was considered by some to be neither Turkish nor Greek, but Jewish; it was, said one writer, "the only Jewish city in Europe (aside from Warsaw)."<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that it became known as the place where many of the Muslims had originally been Jews.

Shabbatai Tzevi was not the first messiah about whose arrival word was first spread openly and then maintained in secret by his devoted followers in Salonika.<sup>18</sup> Most famously, Paul of Tarsus preached in ancient Thessalonikē spreading the word of Jesus' life and death, and making many converts. The city had then witnessed the spread of Christianity among a secret brotherhood of fervent adherents who prayed in secrecy,

recognizing other believers with secret signs and passwords.<sup>19</sup> Shabbatai Tzevi's movement was the second greatest millenarian movement among the Jews after Christianity. Without taking the comparison too far, one can suggest that Shabbatai Tzevi was like Jesus the Messiah to his followers. Like Jesus, Shabbatai Tzevi was a Jew whose Jewish followers established a breakaway movement that emphasized divine renewal, which derived from Judaism but radically diverged from it, abrogating the original laws and becoming something quite different, even if like the first Christians, they too claimed to have discovered the true understanding of the religion and the means of fulfilling divine purpose.<sup>20</sup> The early anti-nomianism of Shabbatai Tzevi was based on his personal knowledge of God, who directly affirmed or negated the laws Jews lived by and revoked the Torah. Shabbatai Tzevi's followers awaited the messiah's second coming, second advent, or reincarnation, like the first Christians.<sup>21</sup> Like the followers of Jesus after his death, the followers of Shabbatai Tzevi decided to continue a movement "launched with the expectation of a speedy end to the present age."<sup>22</sup> And like the first people who accepted that Muhammad was revealing the word of God, this group of followers also at first called themselves "the Believers," using the Hebrew form of the common Semitic word for belief (Hebrew: *Ma'aminim*, Arabic: *Mu'minun*).<sup>23</sup>

## The Establishment of a Group of Converted Followers in Salonika

The nucleus of the Believer community was established in Salonika following the death of Shabbatai Tzevi in 1676 by his Salonikan survivors—his last wife Jochebed, who had converted with the rabbi and had been renamed Aisha, and brother-in-law Yakub Çelebi (Querido), to whom the soul of Shabbatai Tzevi was believed to have transmigrated.<sup>24</sup> Transmigration of souls, or reincarnation, was an important element in the Kabbalah and Sufism, inherited from the earlier cultural milieu in which Jewish and Muslim mystics shared beliefs and practices. In Kabbalah, for example, ever since the twelfth-century *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brightness), reincarnation had been a favorite topic of Jewish mystics. In Sufism, transmigration and reincarnation were central elements of Bektaşî theosophy prevalent in the regions in which the Dönme religion took hold.<sup>25</sup> The Dönme remained open to outside religious influence, particularly Sufism. Shabbatai Tzevi incorporated both Jewish tradition and Sufism

in his theosophy. Thus one group of his followers, the Karakaş, believed that he had gathered the seventy souls that Moses had gathered on Mount Sinai and then redirected them into the Karakaş' bodies. When they married out, they lost those souls; they married each other so as not to lose the connection to that source, and ultimately, redemption. Theirs was an otherworldly mission. Thus we see a mixing of Kabbalistic interpretation of Moses' real duties on Mount Sinai, Sufi understandings of transmigration, and Jewish family values.<sup>26</sup>

Converting Shabbatai Tzevi's antinomianism into ritualized charisma, Yakub Çelebi established the structures according to which Dönme belief and practice were organized, so that a self-sustaining and distinct community emerged. Within a century, the size of the community grew to around six hundred families (perhaps 3,000 people).

A crucial factor in the consolidation and perpetuation of this growing Dönme community was its adherence to the "eighteen commandments" (eighteen being a significant number with life-giving properties for Jews, as well as for Mevlevi Sufis) laid down by Shabbatai Tzevi during his lifetime. The oldest extant copy of these dates from roughly a century after his death.<sup>27</sup> The commandments, which assert that God is one and that Shabbatai Tzevi is the redeemer and messiah, order Dönme to "be scrupulous in their observance of some of the precepts of the Muslims," and to observe "those things which are exposed to the Muslims' view."<sup>28</sup> Dönme were to perform all public Muslim customs and rituals so that other Muslims saw them carrying them out, especially the thirty-day fast of Ramadan and sacrifice of animals at the time of the Hajj. Seeing them fulfill the duties of Islam, Muslims would consider them pious Muslims. Dönme were commanded to not worry or be concerned about whether engaging in them would have a deleterious effect on their pursuit of the Dönme path to God. The commandments also admonished Dönme not to have any relations with other Muslims and to marry only among themselves.

In practice, Dönme also avoided relations with Jews. The Dönme actively maintained their separate identity, keeping detailed genealogies, and burying their dead in distinct cemeteries, walled off from others.<sup>29</sup> To signal their divergence from Jews and Muslims, Dönme developed their own rituals of burial.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the gravestones in Jewish Ottoman cemeteries, Dönme tombstones comprised both head- and footstones and were inscribed in Ottoman script, and their cemeteries were thickly

planted with cypresses, as Muslim cemeteries were. Yet unlike Muslim tombstones, Dönme headstones were rarely topped with turbans.

The symbolism of Dönme tombstones was explained only to members of the group. Dönme existence and persistence was based on secrecy and dissimulation, a radical rupture between public and private practice. As Georg Simmel has written, “The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.”<sup>31</sup> The “second world” created by secrecy protects those who act in secret by making their actions and behavior invisible, thus allowing it to persist. Unlike the people described in Simmel’s account, however, the Dönme, at the time of their conversion, had no plans for altering the society in which they lived. From the beginning, however, they engaged in what the anthropologist Michael Taussig calls “public secrecy”: applying “the labor of the negative”—or knowing what not to know.<sup>32</sup> It is an act of dissimulation. For the Dönme, public secrecy or dissimulation was knowing when to talk and not to talk in public, knowing what to say and what not to say, knowing the right balance between revealing and concealing so as to not destroy the power of the secret by exposing it. As Elliot Wolfson writes, “the secret, therefore, retains its secretive character if it is hidden in its exposure, but it may be hidden in its exposure only if it is exposed in its hiddenness.”<sup>33</sup> As among Freemasons, “secrecy and discretion, accompanied by rules for behavior,” keeping one another’s identities private, and meeting behind closed doors fostered communal bonds.<sup>34</sup>

The survival of the Dönme was in part owing to the fact that despite their differences from Jews and Muslims, they did not attract the attention of the Ottoman authorities after their initial conversion in the late seventeenth century. The sincerity of the Dönme’s religious beliefs was not questioned until the modern era. Once they had converted, it was assumed that they were Muslims, and this was affirmed by their public religious practices. In the premodern empire, there were no policing or inquisitorial agents that attempted to regulate the beliefs and practices of converts to Islam. It was not a question of lacking the power to discipline converts, but of a lack of desire to do so. Religion was manifested primarily in communal belonging, rather than private belief. Yitzhak Ben-Tzevi, who compared the situation of Dönme he encountered in Salonika before 1912 with that under the Turkish Republic during World War II, observes that the Ottoman era was a “period of tranquility” for them.<sup>35</sup>