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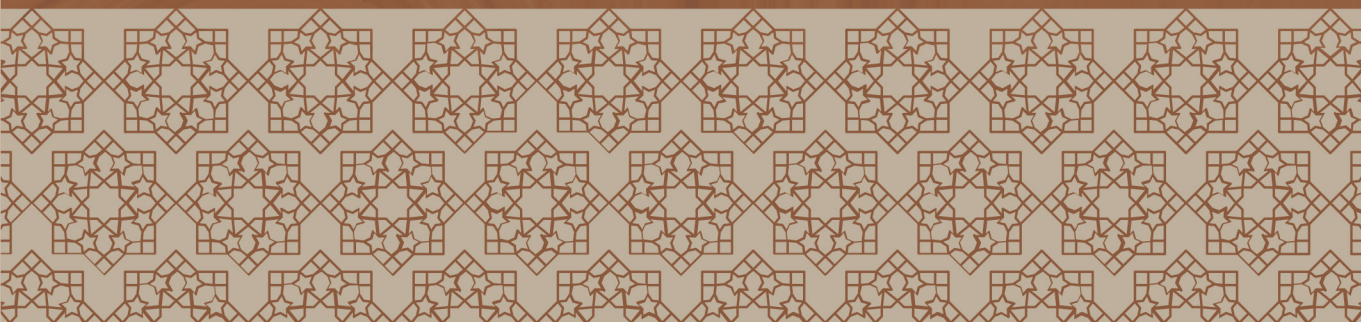
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## SABBATAI ZEVI: TURKEY'S ENIGMATIC MESSIAH

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### Abstract

This study examines the life and spiritual phenomenon of Sabbatai Zevi, a 17th-century Jewish figure who claimed to be the Messiah and had a profound influence on Jewish communities in Turkey and beyond. The academic problem addressed in this study is the historical and theological controversy surrounding Zevi's messianic claims and their socio-religious impact. The methodology employed in this research involves a historical analysis of primary and secondary sources, as well as a literature review of existing studies on Zevi. The theoretical framework is based on religious mysticism and messianic movements within Jewish traditions, particularly the Kabbalistic interpretation of the concept of the Messiah. The results reveal the complexity of Zevi's identity, his impact on Jewish and Ottoman societies, and the transformation of his movement after his forced conversion to Islam. The study concludes that Zevi's influence persists through the Dönme community, whose secret religious practices continue to be a subject of scholarly debate.

**Keywords:** *Sabbatai Zevi, Dönme, Jewish Mysticism, Ottoman Empire*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kehidupan dan fenomena spiritual Sabbatai Zevi, tokoh Yahudi abad ke-17 yang mengklaim sebagai Mesias dan membawa pengaruh besar terhadap komunitas Yahudi di Turki dan sekitarnya. Masalah akademik yang dibahas dalam penelitian ini adalah kontroversi sejarah dan teologis terkait klaim mesianis Zevi serta dampaknya terhadap masyarakat sosial-keagamaan. Metodologi yang digunakan adalah analisis historis terhadap sumber primer dan sekunder, serta tinjauan literatur terhadap penelitian yang telah dilakukan mengenai Zevi. Kerangka teori dalam penelitian ini berpusat pada mistisisme agama dan gerakan mesianis dalam tradisi Yahudi, khususnya interpretasi Kabbalistik tentang Mesias. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan kompleksitas identitas Zevi, dampaknya terhadap masyarakat Yahudi dan Utsmani, serta transformasi gerakannya setelah dipaksa masuk Islam. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa pengaruh Zevi tetap bertahan melalui komunitas Dönme, yang praktik keagamaannya masih menjadi perdebatan akademik hingga kini.

**Kata kunci:** Sabbatai Zevi, Donme, Mistisisme Yahudi, Kesultanan Utsmaniyah



## INTRODUCTION

The concept of messianism has played a pivotal role in Jewish religious thought for centuries. The idea of a divinely appointed savior, who would lead the Jewish people to redemption, has been a recurring theme in Jewish history, often emerging during periods of crisis and upheaval.<sup>1</sup> One of the most controversial messianic figures in Jewish history is Sabbatai Zevi, a 17th-century Ottoman Jew who proclaimed himself the Messiah. His movement gained an unprecedented following across Jewish communities in Europe and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Sabbatai Zevi's rise as a messianic figure did not occur in isolation but was deeply rooted in the social, religious, and political landscape of the 17th century. His claims resonated with Jewish communities who, amid persecution and displacement, were eager for redemption and a return to divine favor. The widespread acceptance of his messianic status was further fueled by the influence of Kabbalistic mysticism, which interpreted historical events as signs of imminent salvation.<sup>3</sup> However, as his movement gained momentum, it also attracted skepticism from religious authorities, resulting in increasing tensions within the Jewish community. These tensions ultimately culminated in Zevi's dramatic conversion to Islam, a turning point that not only shattered his movement but also redefined the nature of Jewish messianism and religious adaptation in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

Zevi's conversion caused a theological crisis within Jewish communities, forcing his followers to either reject his claims or reinterpret his transformation as part of a divine plan. This division led to the formation of the Dönme, a sect that continued to venerate Zevi while outwardly practicing Islam secretly. The case of Zevi raises significant questions about religious identity, faith transitions, and the endurance of messianic movements in Jewish history. Despite the apparent collapse of his movement, Zevi's legacy persisted through the Dönme community, whose influence in Ottoman society remained a subject of speculation and debate.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gavin Michal, "Three Sixteenth-Century Jewish Messiahs," *Journal for Semitics*, August 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6573/11922>.

<sup>2</sup> Cengiz Şişman, *The Burden of Silence: Sabbatai Sevi and the Evolution of the Ottoman-Turkish Donmes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666-1816* (Liverpool University Press, 2015), 10.

<sup>4</sup> "Christianity," in *The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, California 91320 : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483317731.n166>.

<sup>5</sup> K. Yu. Burmistrov, "JEWISH MESSIANISM IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE FROM THE 17TH TO THE 20TH CENTURIES," *Islam in the Modern World* 14, no. 2 (June 26, 2018): 127–46, <https://doi.org/10.22311/2074-1529-2018-14-2-127-146>.



The academic problem at the center of this study is the historical and theological significance of Sabbatai Zevi's messianic movement, particularly its impact on Jewish and Ottoman societies. Previous studies have examined Zevi's influence from historical and mystical perspectives, but the long-term effects of his movement on religious identity and interfaith relations within the Ottoman Empire remain an area of ongoing debate.

The study of Sabbatai Zevi's messianic movement and its long-term impact has been widely explored within the fields of Jewish history, religious mysticism, and Ottoman studies. Gershom Scholem's seminal work on Jewish messianism provides a comprehensive analysis of Zevi's claims within the broader framework of Kabbalistic mysticism,<sup>6</sup> emphasizing the cyclical nature of messianic expectations in Jewish tradition. David Halperin<sup>7</sup> and Ada Rapoport-Albert<sup>8</sup> have also examined Zevi's influence, particularly in relation to the psychological and sociopolitical dynamics of his movement. However, previous studies have primarily focused on Zevi's early rise, his conversion to Islam, and the immediate reactions of Jewish communities, with limited attention to the long-term sociopolitical consequences of his movement within Ottoman society. Studies on the Dönme community, such as those by Marc Baer<sup>9</sup> and Cengiz Şişman,<sup>10</sup> have investigated the group's internal dynamics, but their analyses often remain within ethnographic and cultural frameworks rather than examining Zevi's messianic legacy in shaping their religious transformation.

Unlike existing scholarship, this study aims to bridge the gap by focusing on how Zevi's movement not only influenced Jewish religious identity but also contributed to interfaith interactions, religious duality, and sectarian transformations within the Ottoman Empire. By integrating historical analysis, theological perspectives, and sociopolitical implications, this research seeks to provide a new dimension to the understanding of Zevi's movement. This area has not been systematically analyzed in previous studies.

This study examines the historical conditions that facilitated the emergence of Sabbatai Zevi's messianic movement, exploring the social and religious context that allowed such claims to gain traction. It investigates how Jewish communities reacted to Zevi's messianic declarations, both in terms of support and opposition, and how these reactions changed following his conversion to Islam. The study also seeks to understand the consequences of Zevi's conversion, particularly the theological and communal shifts

<sup>6</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Sabbetai Sevi; Mistik Mesih 1626-1676*, trans. Eşref Bengi Özbilen (Istanbul: Kabalcı yayinevi, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> D. Halperin, *Sabbatai Zevi: Testimonies to a Fallen Messiah* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666-1816*.

<sup>9</sup> David M Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Şişman, *The Burden of Silence: Sabbatai Sevi and the Evolution of the Ottoman-Turkish Dönmes*.

that led to the formation of the Dönme community. Furthermore, it explores the long-term evolution of the Dönme and their role in Ottoman and modern Turkish society, considering how their dual religious identity shaped their historical trajectory. By analyzing these aspects, the study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of messianic movements and their impact on religious and cultural identities.

This study employs the theory of messianic movements within Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah to analyze Zevi's rise and the enduring influence of his movement. Gershom Scholem's theory on Jewish messianism suggests that Jewish messianic expectations often arise in response to historical crises and undergo transformations when faced with opposition. Zevi's movement fits within this framework, as his messianic claim emerged at a time when Jewish communities were searching for redemption amidst historical upheaval. Additionally, this study utilizes the concept of religious duality to understand the transition of the Dönme. In Ottoman religious history, conversion to Islam was not always a reflection of genuine belief but often a political or strategic adaptation. This framework will help analyze how the Dönme maintained a secret Jewish identity while outwardly conforming to Ottoman Islamic norms.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a historical analysis and literature review approach, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. Historical analysis involves critically examining primary sources and contemporary testimonies. The study will analyze how Zevi was perceived by both Jewish and Ottoman authorities and how his movement evolved over time. The literature review consists of an examination of previous scholarly works on Sabbatai Zevi and the Sabbatean movement. A key reference in this study is Abraham Galante's book, *Sabetay Sevi ve Sabetaycılarının Gelenekleri*,<sup>11</sup> which provides an in-depth historical account of the movement from a Turkish perspective.

In the context of the article, "historical analysis" and "literature review" refer to two fundamental research methods used to examine and understand the life and significance of Sabbatai Zevi as well as the spiritual phenomenon surrounding him. Historical Analysis involves a systematic and critical examination of historical sources, documents, and records related to Sabbatai Zevi's life and the historical context in which he lived. Researchers scrutinize primary and secondary sources, such as historical documents, letters, diaries, and contemporary accounts, to reconstruct an accurate and comprehensive historical narrative.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Galante, *Sabetay Sevi ve Sabetaycılarının Gelenekleri*, trans. Erdoğan Ağca (Istanbul: Zvi-Geyik Yayınları, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Ion Georgiou, "The Literature Review as an Exercise in Historical Thinking," *Human Resource Development Review* 20, no. 2 (June 22, 2021): 252–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15344843211004027>.

## JEWISH-TURKISH RELATIONS AND THE FOUNDATION OF MESSIANIC BELIEFS

The historical relationship between the Jewish and Turkish communities spans multiple centuries, shaped by migration patterns, political changes, and shifting religious dynamics. While Jewish presence in Anatolia predates the Ottoman Empire, it was under Ottoman rule that Jewish communities gained a more structured and legally defined role within society. Unlike in many parts of Europe, where Jews often faced persecution, the Ottomans provided a relative degree of religious tolerance, recognizing Jews as *dhimmi*, or protected non-Muslim subjects, under Islamic law. This status allowed them to practice their faith and engage in economic activities, though they were subject to specific taxes and regulations.<sup>13</sup>

The most significant wave of Jewish migration to Ottoman lands occurred following the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492. The Ottoman authorities, particularly under Sultan Bayezid II, welcomed these refugees, recognizing their potential contributions to trade, finance, and the medical field. These newly arrived Sephardic Jews settled in key Ottoman cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Thessaloniki, where they integrated with existing Jewish communities and helped shape the empire's socio-economic landscape. Despite their status as a minority group, Jews often played vital roles in commerce, diplomacy, and even in some administrative capacities.<sup>14</sup>

However, Jewish presence in Ottoman territories was not solely the result of Iberian expulsions. Earlier migrations had already established Jewish enclaves in Anatolia. Some of these Jewish populations traced their ancestry to ancient Israelites, who had fled after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians and the subsequent destruction of the Southern Kingdom by the Babylonians. Over the centuries, these Jewish populations migrated across the Middle East and into Anatolia, contributing to the rich diversity of Jewish traditions in the region.<sup>15</sup>

The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 marked another significant turning point. Sultan Mehmed II actively repopulated the city by encouraging migration from across the empire, including Jewish families.<sup>16</sup> While some Jews were relocated forcibly, others migrated voluntarily, drawn by the opportunities of the empire's new capital. Over time, Jewish communities in Istanbul, particularly in the Kuzguncuk

<sup>13</sup> David Sorkin, "Ottoman Empire and Danubian Provinces," in *Jewish Emancipation* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 263–72, <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691164946.003.0022>.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Süleyman Şanlı, "TÜRKİYE'NİN BİLİNMEYEN DOĞU YAHUDİLERİNİN TARİHSEL GEÇMİŞLERİNE GENEL BİR BAKIŞ," *MUKADDİME*, July 31, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.19059/mukaddime.300003>; Galante, *Sabetay Sevi ve Sabetaycılarının Gelenekleri*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> John Freely, *Kayıp Mesih*, trans. Ayşegül Çetin Tekçe (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2001), 24.

district, became centers of religious learning and cultural exchange. Many Jews revered Kuzguncuk as a sacred space, considering it a place of safety and continuity in their historical journey.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the generally favorable conditions under Ottoman rule, Jewish communities were not immune to periods of suspicion and hostility. The complex interplay of economic competition, religious tensions, and shifting political alliances sometimes led to accusations against Jewish figures. Conspiracy theories regarding the death of Sultan Mehmed II, for instance, implicated Jewish individuals, though these claims were largely speculative and politically motivated. Additionally, during the Crusades and the rise of Christian anti-Semitism, Ottoman lands became a refuge for Jews escaping forced conversions and violence in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

This historical backdrop of migration, adaptation, and religious resilience provided the foundation for the emergence of Jewish mystical movements, including Kabbalistic interpretations of the Messiah. Within this context, Sabbatai Zevi's claims in the 17th century resonated deeply with Jewish communities who had endured exile and displacement. Ottoman Jewish society, shaped by centuries of both protection and marginalization, was particularly receptive to a figure who promised redemption and restoration. Zevi's rise must therefore be understood not only as an isolated religious event but as a product of centuries of Jewish-Ottoman relations, messianic expectations, and Kabbalistic thought that flourished in the empire.

## MESSIANIC IDEOLOGY AND THE ROLE OF KABBALAH THOUGHT

The concept of the Messiah has been deeply embedded in Jewish religious tradition, shaping theological interpretations and communal expectations over the centuries. Rooted in the Hebrew word *ha-Mashiah* and the Aramaic *meshiha*, meaning “the anointed one,” the term historically referred to a divinely chosen figure who would restore Israel and bring spiritual redemption.<sup>19</sup> Classical Jewish thought, particularly as formulated by medieval scholars such as Moses Maimonides, outlined the Messiah as a direct descendant of King David, a figure of unparalleled righteousness who would usher in

<sup>17</sup> Dilek Akyalçın, “The Jewish Community in the Making of Istanbul, Intra Muros, 1453-1520” (Sabancı University, 2003); Harika KARAVİN, “Translating Kuzguncuk: A Site of Tolerance and Solidarity,” *International Journal of Science Culture and Sport* 3, no. 12 (January 1, 2015): 457–457, <https://doi.org/10.14486/IJSCS412>.

<sup>18</sup> Ramazan Günay, “REASONS BEHIND NON-MUSLIMS’ ALLEGIANCE TO THE OTTOMAN STATE,” *Electronic Turkish Studies* 7, no. 14 (2012).

<sup>19</sup> Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, “Jewish and Muslim Messianism in Yemen,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 2 (May 29, 1990): 201–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800033389>.

<sup>20</sup> Şinasi Güzüz, “Din ve İnanç Sözlüğü,” *Mesih* (Istanbul: Vadi Yayınları, 1998), 258.

an era of peace and divine justice.<sup>21</sup> However, the interpretation of messianism evolved significantly over time, influenced by historical crises, exile, and mystical traditions.

Within the Ottoman Jewish community, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries, messianic beliefs became increasingly intertwined with Kabbalistic mysticism.<sup>22</sup> The Safed Kabbalists, most notably Isaac Luria, introduced esoteric doctrines that reinterpreted history as a spiritual process, where hidden divine forces would bring about redemption. This Kabbalistic worldview transformed traditional messianic expectations into a cosmic, mystical event, shifting focus from political or military salvation to metaphysical transformation. Through this framework, the Messiah was no longer merely a human king but became a cosmic redeemer, capable of reversing spiritual disorder in the universe.<sup>23</sup>

This heightened messianic anticipation among Ottoman Jews was not merely theological but also socio-political. Centuries of exile forced conversions, and persecution—particularly following the Spanish Inquisition in 1492—had fostered a deep yearning for divine intervention. The migration of Sephardic Jews into the Ottoman Empire, where they found relative religious tolerance, further shaped their expectations. Ottoman Jews, many of whom had experienced trauma from forced conversion to Christianity, were particularly receptive to mystical interpretations of suffering as a precursor to redemption. Messianic speculation intensified, with Jewish scholars attempting to decipher the Messiah's arrival through numerological calculations derived from the Zohar, the foundational text of Kabbalah.<sup>24</sup>

By the early 17th century, Kabbalistic messianism had given rise to a new category of Jewish leaders, referred to as “Kabbalist Messiahs”—charismatic figures who claimed divine inspiration based on mystical texts. This shift from rationalist Jewish thought to mystical salvation models created the conditions for the rise of Sabbatai Zevi, whose messianic claim in 1648 was not merely a personal declaration but a product of an evolving religious framework.<sup>25</sup> Zevi's movement was built upon these existing Kabbalistic

<sup>21</sup> Jesus Christ, “Why the Jews Reject Jesus and What It Means,” 2013, <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:40261411>.

<sup>22</sup> Morris M. Faierstein, “Traces of Lurianic Kabbalah: Texts and Their Histories,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 1 (December 2013): 101–6, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2013.0001>.

<sup>23</sup> Morris M. Faierstein, “Safed Kabbalah and the Sephardic Heritage,” in *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* (New York University Press, 2005), 196–215.

<sup>24</sup> Michal Ohana, “Jewish Thought in Fez in the Generations Following the Spanish Expulsion: Characteristics, Style, and Content,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111, no. 4 (2021): 605–21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2021.0040>; van P.W.J. Bekkum, “Joodse Reacties Op Het Verdrijvingsedict van Koning Ferdinand En Koningin Isabel van Spanje (1492),” *Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis* 118 (2005): 434–47, <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:148316482>.

<sup>25</sup> Sharon Flatto, “The Doctrine of Exile in Kabbalah,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 73–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190240943.013.14>.

doctrines, particularly the idea that suffering and exile were divine tests that would culminate in an imminent transformation.

At the time of Zevi's emergence in Izmir, Jewish communities across the Ottoman Empire, Europe, and the Middle East were primed for a messianic figure. The year 1648 was particularly significant, as it coincided with interpretations in Kabbalistic texts that predicted a new cosmic era. Zevi, heavily influenced by Kabbalistic teachings, utilized these prophecies to legitimize his messianic status. His followers, many of whom were already deeply engaged in mystical numerology and apocalyptic readings of history, saw his proclamation not as an isolated event but as the fulfillment of divine calculations.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Zevi's success in attracting widespread devotion was not merely the result of his personal charisma but rather the product of centuries of evolving messianic ideology, particularly as it developed within the Ottoman Jewish world. The convergence of Kabbalistic theology, historical persecution, and socio-political displacement created an environment in which the idea of a mystical redeemer, rather than a military savior, became a widely accepted and even expected reality. The Sabbatean movement, therefore, represents a case study in how religious beliefs transform in response to historical and spiritual crises, illustrating how Jewish mysticism provided both the framework and justification for Zevi's claims.

## THE FORMATION OF A MESSIANIC IDENTITY IN OTTOMAN JEWISH SOCIETY

The emergence of Sabbatai Zevi as a messianic figure must be understood within the religious, mystical, and socio-political framework of 17th-century Ottoman Jewish communities. Born in İzmir in 1626 (or 1632, according to some sources) to a family of Spanish Jewish descent, Zevi was raised in an environment deeply influenced by Sephardic traditions, Kabbalistic thought, and Ottoman religious diversity. His father, Mordecai Zevi, was a merchant who relocated to Izmir due to its growing importance as a trade hub during the Cretan War, and his family's status within the Jewish community afforded him access to theological education.<sup>27</sup>

Zevi's religious formation was shaped by his early exposure to Kabbalistic teachings, particularly through Haham Isaac d'Alba, who introduced him to mystical interpretations of Jewish scripture. From a young age, he demonstrated a deep

<sup>26</sup> Adam Teller, "The Wars in Eastern Europe, the Jews of Jerusalem, and the Rise of Sabbateanism: The Shaping of the Jewish World in the Mid-Seventeenth Century," *Jewish History* 33, no. 3–4 (July 17, 2020): 377–402, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10835-020-09363-2>.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Benichou Gottreich, "OF MESSIAHS AND SULTANS: SHABBATAI ZEVI AND EARLY MODERNITY IN MOROCCO," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12, no. 2 (July 2013): 184–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2013.796156>.



fascination with Kabbalah, favoring its esoteric insights over the more rationalist traditions of Talmudic study. Unlike other rabbinical students of his time, he gravitated toward ascetic practices, engaging in frequent fasting and ritual purification, which aligned with Lurianic Kabbalah's emphasis on spiritual preparation for the arrival of the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> His increasing obsession with mystical traditions and his withdrawal from conventional scholarship led to growing speculation about his mental state, with later accounts suggesting that he exhibited signs of psychological instability or epilepsy—though such claims remain speculative.<sup>29</sup>

By the age of 15, Zevi had begun teaching Kabbalah, and at 18, he gathered a group of disciples, presenting himself as someone with exceptional insight into divine mysteries. His religious trajectory coincided with a period of heightened messianic anticipation, as many Jews believed that 1648 or 1666 would mark the dawn of a new divine era, based on numerological interpretations of the Zohar, a central text of Kabbalistic mysticism. This apocalyptic fervor was particularly strong in Ottoman Jewish communities, which had absorbed Sephardic messianic traditions following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.<sup>30</sup> The widespread hope for redemption, combined with economic instability and religious persecution in parts of Europe, created an environment ripe for the emergence of a messianic figure.

Zevi's personal development mirrored this broader spiritual climate. He reportedly became convinced that he was destined to fulfill the messianic prophecies found in Jewish mystical texts. However, his increasingly radical behavior—including the public pronouncement of the divine name (a serious transgression in Jewish law)—led to tension with rabbinical authorities in Izmir. While his closest followers accepted his claims, others viewed his declarations as blasphemous or delusional. As a result, he faced rejection from the Jewish establishment, forcing him to leave Izmir and seek validation elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

The proclamation of Sabbatai Zevi as the Messiah in 1648 marked the beginning of one of the most dramatic and divisive messianic movements in Jewish history. While his messianic role was initially confined to small circles of followers, the broader Ottoman Jewish community would soon be drawn into a theological and political crisis that challenged traditional Jewish authority and Ottoman religious policy.

<sup>28</sup> Gerold Necker, "Kabbalah, Education, and Prayer: Jewish Learning in the Seventeenth Century," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50, no. 6–7 (May 12, 2018): 621–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1373344>.

<sup>29</sup> Pawel Maciejko, ed., *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity* (Brandeis University Press, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Teller, "The Wars in Eastern Europe, the Jews of Jerusalem, and the Rise of Sabbateanism: The Shaping of the Jewish World in the Mid-Seventeenth Century."

<sup>31</sup> Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*.



## THE PROCLAMATION OF THE MESSIAH AND THE GLOBAL RESPONSE

Following the emergence of Sabbatai Zevi's messianic claims, he quickly became a polarizing figure within the Jewish community. While some regarded him as the long-awaited redeemer, others viewed his behavior as signs of delusion or even heresy. The controversy surrounding Zevi led to growing opposition from rabbinical authorities, particularly in Izmir, where Jewish leaders saw him as a threat to religious order. Despite this, Zevi's conviction in his divine mission remained unwavering. He sought to gather a dedicated following, even as local rabbis issued a formal decree excommunicating him and his supporters, deeming them worthy of capital punishment. Facing mounting hostility, Zevi recognized that remaining in Izmir was no longer viable. Thus, he embarked on a journey beyond his hometown, seeking a place where his claims would be more widely accepted.<sup>32</sup>

Zevi's departure from Izmir marked the beginning of his attempts to expand his influence within the Jewish diaspora of the Ottoman Empire. In 1650, he arrived in Istanbul, where he encountered Rabbi Abraham Vaçini, a Kabbalist who possessed a mystical text known as the *Mezamir-i Süleyman Tefsiri* (Commentary on Solomon's Psalms).<sup>33</sup> This document, interpreted as a prophetic validation of Zevi's messianic claims, became a key tool in strengthening his credibility. Armed with Kabbalistic justifications and a growing reputation, Zevi gained traction among segments of the Istanbul Jewish community.<sup>34</sup> However, his notoriety also attracted scrutiny. The rabbis of Izmir issued warnings to their counterparts in Istanbul, urging them to reject Zevi's teachings. Recognizing that opposition in the city was mounting, Zevi decided to relocate once again, this time to Thessaloniki.

Thessaloniki held particular significance in the development of Zevi's messianic movement. The city was known as a center for Jewish scholarship and Kabbalistic study, making it a strategic location for someone seeking followers among mystically inclined Jews. Upon arrival, Zevi proceeded with caution, carefully assessing local expectations regarding the Messiah. Presenting himself as a scholarly mystic, he gradually gained the trust of Thessaloniki's Jewish population. His charismatic presence led some individuals to revere him deeply, with one devoted follower even offering him his daughter in marriage.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Yaacob Dweck, "Jacob Sasportas and Jewish Messianism," in *Formations of Belief* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 41–66, <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691190754.003.0003>.

<sup>33</sup> İbrahim Alaettin Gövsa, *SABBATAI SEVİ* (Istanbul: Mai Yayınevi, 2022).

<sup>34</sup> František ŠÍSTEK, "„THE FALSE MESSIAH“ IN ALKUM: THE EARTHLY LIFE & AFTERLIFE OF SABBATAI ZEVİ IN ULCINJ (1673–2022)," *Lingua Montenegrina* 29, no. 1 (June 1, 2022): 267–94, <https://doi.org/10.46584/lm.v29i1.907>; Richard H. Popkin, "Three English Tellings of the Sabbatai Zevi Story," *Jewish History* 8, no. 1–2 (March 1994): 43–54, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01915907>.

<sup>35</sup> Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*.

Despite this initial acceptance, Zevi's growing messianic rhetoric soon provoked the ire of Thessaloniki's rabbinical authorities. Accused of blasphemy and self-deification, he once again faced condemnation. Forced to flee, he traveled to Athens, only to encounter similar skepticism. Unable to establish himself there, he eventually returned to Izmir, seeking temporary refuge with his father before making yet another attempt to garner support in Istanbul. By 1659, Zevi found wealthy Jewish patrons in the city who provided financial backing. However, even with this newfound support, rabbinical opposition in Istanbul persisted, preventing him from establishing a firm base. Consequently, he returned to Izmir once again, seeking a more secure environment in which to rebuild his movement.<sup>36</sup>

During his time in Izmir, Zevi engaged in self-reflection, contemplating his failed attempts to establish himself as the Messiah. However, rather than abandoning his mission, he viewed his setbacks as part of a divine plan. Determined to continue, he embarked on a journey to Cairo, where he became involved in charitable activities. Tasked by Palestinian Jewish leaders with raising funds for people experiencing poverty in Jerusalem, he used this opportunity to strengthen his credibility among influential Jewish figures. It was during this period that he encountered Rafael Josef Çelebi, a wealthy Jewish financier who would later become a crucial supporter of his movement.<sup>37</sup>

Another pivotal moment in Zevi's journey came in 1664, when he married Sara, a Polish woman who had converted to Judaism and claimed that she was destined to wed the Messiah. Sara's unwavering belief in Zevi's divine status reinforced his own conviction, further solidifying his self-perception as the redeemer of Israel. Shortly after, Zevi traveled to Gaza, where he encountered Nathan of Gaza, a young and charismatic Kabbalist. Nathan, claiming to have received prophetic visions, publicly declared that Zevi was indeed the Messiah, chosen by God to redeem the Jewish people.<sup>38</sup> This endorsement radically changed Zevi's movement, providing it with a sense of divine legitimacy. Nathan's influence also helped reframe Zevi's earlier failures, portraying them as necessary trials leading up to his ultimate redemption.

With Nathan at his side, Zevi's messianic claims took on a new level of sophistication. Nathan positioned him not only as the Messiah but also as a cosmic figure with divine attributes, an idea drawn from Kabbalistic mysticism.<sup>39</sup> This shift transformed the movement from a local phenomenon into an international messianic revival, drawing

<sup>36</sup> ŚISTEK, „„THE FALSE MESSIAH“ IN ALKUM: THE EARTHLY LIFE & AFTERLIFE OF SABBATAI ZEVI IN ULCINJ (1673–2022).”

<sup>37</sup> Teller, “The Wars in Eastern Europe, the Jews of Jerusalem, and the Rise of Sabbateanism: The Shaping of the Jewish World in the Mid-Seventeenth Century.”

<sup>38</sup> Dweck, “Jacob Sasportas and Jewish Messianism”; Galante, *Sabetay Sevi ve Sabetaycıların Gelenekleri*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*.

Jewish communities from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East into Zevi's orbit. By 1665, Zevi, with Nathan's backing, set out for Jerusalem, aiming to declare himself as the Messiah on Mount Zion publicly. Arriving in May, his proclamation triggered a mix of fervent excitement and deep opposition. While some embraced his message, the rabbis of Jerusalem fiercely rejected his claims, warning that they would bring persecution upon the Jewish community. Nevertheless, his movement continued to grow, fueled by widespread messianic anticipation and Nathan's strategic promotion of his divine mission.<sup>40</sup>

As Zevi's reputation spread across the Jewish world, reports of his messianic mission reached far beyond Ottoman lands. In cities such as Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Avignon, his name was hailed as the King of Israel, and Jews as far away as Poland and Iran began preparing for a mass exodus to the Promised Land. Many of his followers sold their possessions, believing that worldly wealth would soon become irrelevant in the messianic era. Even non-Jews took notice, with some Christians viewing Zevi as a harbinger of the end times.<sup>41</sup>

Zevi, emboldened by this growing support, began to act as a sovereign leader, adopting the title of "King of Kings" and dividing the world into 38 provinces, with Jerusalem as the capital. His followers believed that he would overthrow the Ottoman Empire and restore Jewish rule in the Holy Land.<sup>42</sup> As the movement intensified, radical elements among his disciples began engaging in acts of violence, targeting Jewish opponents and looting their properties. This dramatic escalation placed Zevi and his followers on a direct collision course with Ottoman authorities, setting the stage for the final and most controversial phase of his movement.<sup>43</sup>

## FORCED CONVERSION AND THE FORMATION OF THE DÖNMEH SECT

By 1666, Sabbatai Zevi's movement had reached its peak, spreading across the Ottoman Empire, Europe, and North Africa. His growing influence and messianic proclamations, however, drew increased scrutiny from both Jewish and Ottoman authorities. In Izmir, concerned rabbis had already taken action by reporting his activities to the local qadi (Muslim judge), hoping to undermine his growing power. Although

<sup>40</sup> Dweck, "Jacob Sasportas and Jewish Messianism."

<sup>41</sup> Carsten L. Wilke, "Le «Messie Mystique» et La Bourse d'Amsterdam, Le 3 Mai 1666," *Sefarad* 67, no. 1 (June 30, 2007): 191–212, <https://doi.org/10.3989/sefarad.2007.v67.i1.437>.

<sup>42</sup> Popkin, "Three English Tellings of the Sabbatai Zevi Story."

<sup>43</sup> Yaron Ben-Naeh, "Violence in Ottoman Jewish Society: Izmir as a Case Study," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015).

the qadi initially issued a warning, rumors circulated that he had been bribed to avoid taking punitive measures—though no concrete evidence supports this claim.<sup>44</sup>

Emboldened by his expanding movement, Zevi began making modifications to Jewish traditions and rituals, introducing new holidays and practices that reflected his self-proclaimed messianic authority. These changes, which deviated from rabbinic orthodoxy, further alienated him from Jewish religious leadership. Yet, among his followers, these reforms strengthened their belief that Zevi's mission was divinely ordained. His charismatic persona and mystical rhetoric convinced them that he was not merely a reformer but a cosmic redeemer ushering in a new spiritual era.<sup>45</sup>

Zevi's increasingly bold assertions of power soon attracted the attention of the Ottoman state. His actions, including public proclamations that challenged imperial authority, were perceived as a potential threat to political stability. In September 1666, Ottoman officials arrested Zevi near Çanakkale and transferred him to Edirne, where Sultan Mehmed IV and his court would decide his fate. Initially, Zevi avoided severe punishment through bribery, leveraging the support of sympathetic Ottoman officials. However, widespread complaints and growing unrest prompted the sultan to intervene directly. Zevi was summoned to stand trial before the Divan (Ottoman imperial council), where the stakes were clear—renounce his claims or face execution.<sup>46</sup>

During his trial in Edirne, Zevi was confronted with a critical choice: maintain his messianic stance and risk death or submit to Ottoman authority. In a dramatic and unexpected turn, Zevi publicly denied the charges against him, ridiculed the Jewish community, and proclaimed his conversion to Islam—all on the solemn Jewish fast day of Tisha B'Av (9 Av), a day that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples. His decision sent shockwaves through Jewish communities worldwide, shaking the very foundation of the Sabbatean movement.<sup>47</sup>

On September 16, 1666, Zevi formally embraced Islam in the presence of the sultan, adopting the name "Mehmed" or "Aziz Mehmed Efendi". His wife, Sara, also converted to Islam, assuming the name "Fatma Hanım". With this act, the hopes of his followers crumbled, and what had once been a powerful messianic movement seemed to collapse overnight.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Dweck, "Jacob Sasportas and Jewish Messianism"; Galante, *Sabetay Sevi ve Sabetaycılarının Gelenekleri*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Louis Jacobs, "Reviews : Elisheva Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the Sabbatian Controversies*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990; ISBN 0-231-07191-4; Xv + 364 Pp.; £16.50," *European History Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 578–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026569149802800415>.

<sup>46</sup> ŠÍSTEK, "„THE FALSE MESSIAH“ IN ALKUM: THE EARTHLY LIFE & AFTERLIFE OF SABBATAI ZEVI IN ULCINJ (1673–2022)."

<sup>47</sup> Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> ŠÍSTEK, "„THE FALSE MESSIAH“ IN ALKUM: THE EARTHLY LIFE & AFTERLIFE

Despite his conversion to Islam, many of Zevi's most devoted followers refused to accept that their Messiah had failed. Instead, they reinterpreted his apostasy as a divine mystery, drawing parallels between Zevi and biblical figures like Moses and Esther. Just as Esther entered the Persian king's court to protect her people, and Moses lived among non-believers before leading the Israelites to salvation, Zevi's conversion was seen as a necessary step in fulfilling his divine mission. This rationale allowed his movement to survive, albeit in a radically altered form.<sup>49</sup> This period of theological reinterpretation led to the formation of the Dönme sect—a crypto-Jewish community that outwardly practiced Islam but secretly maintained Sabbatean beliefs. Many of Zevi's followers converted to Islam, believing that they were still part of a hidden spiritual process that would ultimately lead to redemption. While they publicly adopted Ottoman Muslim customs, including praying in mosques and taking Islamic names, they continued to observe Sabbatean teachings in secret.<sup>50</sup>

Zevi himself lived under close imperial watch following his conversion. Although he was granted a position in the Ottoman administration, his movements were monitored, and his influence curtailed. Ultimately, the Ottomans saw him as both a religious asset and a potential threat. To further limit his influence, he was exiled to Ulcinj (modern-day Montenegro/Albania), where he spent his remaining years in relative obscurity.<sup>51</sup>

During his exile in Ulcinj, Zevi continued to develop his own religious doctrines, formulating the 18 Principles and Amentia, which later became the foundational texts of the Dönme sect. These principles, while incorporating some elements of Islamic thought, also retained significant Jewish mystical concepts. However, they contained a strong opposition to mainstream Islam, reflecting the sect's dual identity—outwardly Muslim but inwardly Sabbatean.

Although Zevi died in 1676, his followers did not abandon his messianic mission. The Dönme community persisted in secrecy, adapting to life within the Ottoman Empire while retaining their unique religious identity. Over time, the movement fragmented into different sects, each with varying interpretations of Zevi's teachings. Some of his students (*ma'aminim*) continued to await his return, believing that his conversion was

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OF SABBATAI ZEVI IN ULCINJ (1673–2022).”

<sup>49</sup> M. Goldish, “Patterns in Converso Messianism,” in *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2001), 41–63, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-2278-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-2278-0_2).

<sup>50</sup> Marc Baer, “The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 4 (October 4, 2004): 682–708, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417504000325>.

<sup>51</sup> ŠÍSTEK, “„THE FALSE MESSIAH“ IN ALKUM: THE EARTHLY LIFE & AFTERLIFE OF SABBATAI ZEVI IN ULCINJ (1673–2022).”

merely a test of faith. In contrast, others evolved into a separate religious group distinct from both Judaism and Islam.<sup>52</sup>

## THE EVOLUTION AND LEGACY OF THE DÖNMEH SECT

Following Sabbatai Zevi's death in 1676, his movement did not vanish but instead transformed into a secretive and complex religious identity. Despite the collapse of his public messianic claims, his followers, particularly in Thessaloniki, remained steadfast in their belief that Zevi had not truly died but had "withdrawn from the world." This belief, rooted in Kabbalistic and messianic traditions, sustained the idea that the Messiah was not bound by mortal existence but remained spiritually present. The continued existence of Sabbateanism within Ottoman society demonstrated the resilience of Zevi's teachings and the lasting commitment of his followers to his vision.<sup>53</sup>

In the years following Zevi's death, his movement fractured into distinct factions, each interpreting his messianic role in a different manner. A central figure in this post-Zevi period was Yakup Çelebi, also known as Josef Querido, who assumed leadership within the Thessaloniki-based Sabbatean community. To establish his authority, Yakup attempted to perform miraculous acts, but disputes arose over the legitimacy of his leadership. These conflicts led to divisions within the movement. Some followers sought a return to mainstream Judaism, rejecting Zevi's conversion as a divine act. Others embraced an Islamic identity while maintaining secret Jewish practices. A third faction remained fully committed to Zevi's 18 principles, believing in his continued messianic mission. While these divisions weakened the movement's cohesion, they also demonstrated the adaptability of Sabbateanism, allowing different groups to reconcile their faith with their social realities within the Ottoman and later Turkish states.<sup>54</sup> Although the Sabbatean movement declined during the late Ottoman period and the early 20th century, remnants of the Dönme sect persisted among its adherents.

Among those who maintained a secret Jewish identity within an outwardly Muslim framework, a distinct religious identity emerged. This group became known as the Avdeti and gained recognition among Turks and scholars of religious history. Unlike earlier crypto-Jewish movements, which adhered to Judaism in secret, the Dönme evolved into a distinct religious group that outwardly practiced Islam but retained unique rituals. Their religious identity was characterized by public adherence to Islamic customs, including

<sup>52</sup> K. Yu. Burmistrov, "JEWISH MESSIANISM IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE FROM THE 17TH TO THE 20TH CENTURIES," *Islam in the Modern World* 14, no. 2 (June 26, 2018): 127–46, <https://doi.org/10.22311/2074-1529-2018-14-2-127-146>.

<sup>53</sup> ŠISTEK, "„THE FALSE MESSIAH“ IN ALKUM: THE EARTHLY LIFE & AFTERLIFE OF SABBATAI ZEVI IN ULCINJ (1673–2022)."

<sup>54</sup> Mark Mazower, "Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe," in *Global Minority Rights*, ed. Joshua Castellino (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315254203>.



mosque attendance and fasting during Ramadan, while privately maintaining Jewish traditions, such as reciting Psalms and observing specific dates on the Hebrew calendar. The Dönme also celebrated distinct festivals, separate from both mainstream Islam and traditional Judaism, while sustaining the belief that Zevi had not died. The continued devotion to this belief reinforced the messianic expectations that defined their identity.<sup>55</sup>

While the Dönme community flourished within Thessaloniki, its ambiguous religious status made it a subject of suspicion and speculation within both Jewish and Muslim societies. Their existence remained a source of curiosity and controversy, particularly among Ottoman authorities and later, the Turkish Republic. As the Ottoman Empire transitioned into modern Turkey, debates surrounding the identity and loyalty of the Dönme resurfaced.<sup>56</sup>

In 1924, a merchant named Karakaş-zâde Rüştü, of Sabbatean origin, sent an open letter to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, exposing the presence of a secretive group known as the Selanıkliler, or Thessalonians. He alleged that this group publicly presented themselves as Muslims but remained Jewish in private. This revelation sparked heated debates in the Turkish press regarding the true nature of the Dönme community. In his letter to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Karakaş-zâde Rüştü emphasized that the foundation of the Turkish Republic should be based on Turkish national identity and raised concerns about the allegiance of the Dönme community. He described them as a group that had falsely converted to Islam at the behest of their leaders yet remained ethnically and spiritually Jewish.<sup>57</sup>

Historical and political developments further intensified the controversy surrounding the Dönme. Early 20th-century claims by Greek-based Dönme communities that they were, in fact, Jewish fueled the debate. The assassination attempts on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in which a high-profile Dönme figure, M. Cavit Bey, a former Minister of Finance, was implicated, added another layer of suspicion. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 led to some Dönme emigrating to Israel and transferring historical documents to the Hebrew Institute.<sup>58</sup> These events kept the Dönme identity a subject of public debate, with various political, religious, and nationalist groups using their

<sup>55</sup> Baer, "The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism."

<sup>56</sup> MARC DAVID BAER, "An Enemy Old and New: The Dönme, Anti-Semitism, and Conspiracy Theories in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 4 (2013): 523–55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43298763>.

<sup>57</sup> CENGİZ ŞİŞMAN and MUHARREM VAROL, "Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Sabataycılık Tartışmaları: Türk Sesi Gazetesi'nden 1924 Tarihli Bilinmeyen Bir Tefrika" 25, no. 1 (January 2015): 189–233.

<sup>58</sup> BAER, "An Enemy Old and New: The Dönme, Anti-Semitism, and Conspiracy Theories in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic"; Abdurrahman Küçük, "Günümüzde Sabataycılık/Dönmelik Meselesi Üzerine Düşünceler," September 2004.



existence to advance competing narratives about Turkish identity, Jewish history, and religious transformation.

Even in the present day, the Dönme remains a topic of historical inquiry and sociopolitical speculation. While the movement has largely assimilated into Turkish society, remnants of its traditions and historical narratives continue to intrigue scholars. Discussions about the Dönme have become particularly prominent in conspiracy theories, nationalist discourses, and debates about the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and political identity.

Some scholars argue that the Dönme made significant contributions to Ottoman and Turkish modernization, particularly through their involvement in trade, politics, and secular reform movements.<sup>59</sup> Others view them as a closed, secretive sect that maintained distinct religious and social practices, fueling longstanding suspicions about their true affiliations. The legacy of Sabbatai Zevi and the Dönme sect thus represents one of the most enigmatic chapters in Jewish, Ottoman, and Turkish history. Their transformation from a radical messianic movement to a complex crypto-religious community illustrates the resilience of religious identity in the face of political pressure, forced conversions, and shifting social landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

The historical conditions that led to the rise of Sabbatai Zevi's messianic movement were deeply rooted in the socio-political and religious landscape of the 17th century. Jewish communities across the Ottoman Empire and Europe, influenced by Kabbalistic mysticism and apocalyptic expectations, were primed for the emergence of a messianic figure. Zevi's charismatic persona, combined with the instability and persecution experienced by Jewish communities, allowed his message to spread rapidly. His early years in Izmir, Istanbul, and Thessaloniki demonstrated his ability to attract followers while simultaneously provoking opposition from rabbinical authorities. Despite facing repeated excommunication and rejection, Zevi's movement continued to grow, culminating in his public declaration as the Messiah in 1665. The endorsement by Nathan of Gaza played a pivotal role in legitimizing his claims, transforming Zevi's movement from a localized phenomenon into a global messianic revival that influenced Jewish communities across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.

The reaction to Zevi's messianic claims varied widely, leading to both enthusiastic acceptance and fierce opposition. While many Jews eagerly awaited his prophesied redemption, others, including Ottoman authorities and traditional rabbinical leadership,

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<sup>59</sup> Baer, "The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism."

viewed his movement as dangerous. His forced conversion to Islam in 1666 marked a turning point, shattering the hopes of many followers while also giving rise to a new theological interpretation among his most devoted supporters. These followers, who later formed the Dönme sect, redefined Zevi's conversion as part of a hidden divine mission. The Dönme community, outwardly Muslim but secretly maintaining Sabbatean teachings, navigated Ottoman society with a dual religious identity for centuries. As the Ottoman Empire transitioned into the modern Turkish Republic, the status of the Dönme became a subject of debate, with accusations of political disloyalty and conspiracy theories placing them at the center of nationalist discourses. The legacy of Zevi's movement, despite its decline in the 20th century, continues to influence academic discussions on religious identity, conversion, and messianic movements.

Future research on Sabbatai Zevi and the Dönme could benefit from a comparative approach, examining similar messianic movements in other religious traditions to understand how charismatic leaders shape theological transformations. Additionally, further study into the socio-political role of the Dönme in Ottoman and modern Turkish history could provide deeper insight into how religious communities navigate forced conversions and assimilation. Exploring archival materials, personal accounts, and oral histories from the descendants of the Dönme may also offer a more nuanced perspective on their historical trajectory and evolution of identity. As religious studies and historical research continue to uncover new dimensions of this enigmatic movement, the case of Sabbatai Zevi remains a critical example of how faith, politics, and identity intersect in shaping the history of religion.

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