The affair surrounding the appearance of Sabbatai Sevi as messiah in the mid-seventeenth century touches on the mysterious charm of Judaism, embracing some hidden core that the believer’s soul feels is always there, beyond the formal world of Halakhah, institutions, and laws of “overt” Judaism. This explains the attraction to mysticism throughout the generations, and Sabbatianism touched on this in the deepest manner, playing as it did on the most sensitive harp string of the Jewish people: redemption.

In modern times, when Jewish spirituality has become a desired commodity and “redemption” a personal dimension, as part of the spiritual wave sweeping Western culture as a whole, Jews are also looking for something different, deeper and more existentialist. After the waning of the great ideals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after the success of Zionism, the time has come for the individual. The source of Jewish existence has become more desirable, and indeed almost essential. This explains the growth of neo-Hasidism in the last generation, the enthusiasm for Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, and the interest in all strata of Jewish mystical literature. The existential language of the mystical literature, the spirit and the soul, has suddenly become more comprehensive, and people connect to it instantly. There is a clear sense that the consciousness of this generation, both collectively and individually, is wired in a different way, working on “vibes” and “energies.” It differs radically from the cognitive paradigms of the preceding centuries, which created philosophy, Halakhah, and ideals. Perhaps this is a counter-reaction to new technology and to the internet revolution, or perhaps it is part of this process – this question is beyond our purview here.

Sabbatai Sevi and those around him have enjoyed a resurgence of interest as part of this process: not because of the messianic tension, surge, and hope; nor because of the desire for national redemption – but as part of the search for personal redemption in the writings and legacy he left behind. Sabbatianism today is once again fascinating the public consciousness; new studies are appearing, symposia and lectures and being held, because the time is right for this: Jewish mystical language can more easily be absorbed today.

Although this process began with the help of researchers and historians, it has long since been taken from them and become part of the general domain. Like any Kabbalistic spiritual theory, Kabbalistic and Hasidic spirituality is dynamic and undergoes changes as it is reabsorbed in the consciousness of the present generation. Almost every decade, a natural and vital need is felt to reinterpret the Kabbalistic language and adjust the discourse to meet the consciousness. The first scholars who addressed this field, such as Gershom Scholem, are given an honorable place as early discovers and pioneering commentators, but the many decades that have passed since demand a newer and more adapted approach, more creative, flowing, and vigorous, based on those who first paved the way but forging forward in Israel (and, it emerges, in similar yet different ways – abroad).

Against the above background we find the novel *Nehemiah* by the scholar and writer Yakov Z. Meyer, which was published in a Hebrew-language version in Israel in November 2019. The book marks a transition from the generation of mystical scholarship to a generation of experience grounded in the existing knowledge. The book has aroused considerable interest in Israel for the past few months and continues to appear in headlines in newspapers, literary supplements, and in social media – a surprising phenomenon for a historical novel.

Is this an important book in terms of the study of Jewish thought and the history of the Sabbatian movement? I believe so. Although it belongs to the genre of historical fiction, it can serve to complete the scholarly picture available to us. There is something fascinating about viewing the story of Sabbatai Sevi again through the eyes of a third player, as distinct from the two with whom we are familiar: Sabbatai Sevi himself and Nathan of Gaza. This is particular true given that the author is a scholar who presents a relatively reliable historical picture – if not in its details, then at least in its essence and in the surrounding contemporary reality, as we shall see below.

<<Because of the enormous impact of G. Scholem on our understanding of Sabbatianism.>> This novel focuses its gaze on the Polish Kabbalist Nehemiah Cohen, an obscure figure about whom we have little real information, except for the fact that he met with Sabbatai Sevi and subsequently, like Sabbatai, converted to Islam.

In a Facebook post, the critic Aviad Goldman detailed the scholarly versions concerning Nehemiah. Prof. Gershom Scholem, the first scholar of Sabbatianism, adopted in his book the Christian description provided by the priest who was present at the meeting, and Nehemiah himself also accepted this version, as he recounted shortly before his death to a naïve Jew in Amsterdam (R. Laibel Ben Ozer), and as quoted in the postface to the book. According to this version, Nehemiah spent three days and three nights arguing with Sabbatai Sevi, and when he realized that Sabbatai was a false messiah, he converted to Islam so that the Jews would not kill him – and informed on him to the Sultan.

A different account is offered by R. Jacob Sasportas, the first hunter of Sabbatians, who claims that Nehemiah was a Sabbatian and was sent to convert to Islam by Sabbatai himself. Meyer more or less adopts Sasportas’s version, arguing that Nehemiah was exploited by Sabbatai Sevi and his associates. He was sent to convert to Islam under threat so that the Ottomans would refrain from persecuting Sabbatai himself. When this move proved unsuccessful, Nehemiah was accused of handing Sabbatai Sevi over to the Ottoman authorities.

Author Yakov Z. Meyer decided to create a literary portrait of Nehemiah and weave convoluted plots around his character. Meyer’s Nehemiah is complex, skeptical, deceitful, and crafty; above all, he is constantly trying to get something that he does not and will never have. Yakov Z. Meyer’s Nehemiah comes across as an almost postmodern character and as a tortured soul.

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I deliberately refrain here from the common practice of labelling Sabbatai Sevi a “false messiah.” We must recall that a messiah never operates in a vacuum, but is a figure who appears in direct affinity to his awaiting congregation; it is these two sides together that create the messianic phenomenon. With this in mind, the messiah’s story as perceived by his congregation is always the proper, and indeed the most interesting, story. The novel before us presents the world of the simple folk who flock after the new messiah, and the author guides his hero through the thorny byroads of the margins of Jewish society: a tortured figure without vacillates between integrity and deception, accompanied by scholars to his one side and pimps to the other.

Yakov Z. Meyer is a scholar and a historian who explores the history of the Hebrew book. When reading his novel, it is difficult to distinguish between the narrator and the historian; the two blend together. Meyer follows in the tradition of the picaresque novel, which centers on a dynamic hero who embarks on an eventful journey of twists and turns. The novel is replete with passages of action and adventure, detective work and chases; indeed, there is virtually no genre from the field of action literature that is not woven into the plot, sometimes to an extent that I found excessive. As you enter the novel, you embark on a journey of your own, becoming the quintessential and eternal wandering Jew. As I read, I traveled with Nehemiah through the landscapes of Poland, the monasteries and markets, the roads and roadsides, the wagons and merchandise, and so on and so forth. This is a surprising novel: every page brings some unanticipated development, serving only to obscure the next twist in the road ahead.

As a historian, Meyer enriches his work with credible topical details relating to every facet of seventeenth-century life: the utensils and foodstuffs; the dress and customs of the Jews; the arrival of coffee, gunpowder, and magnets, and so on. Above all, he artfully depicts his heroes as marginal and dubious figures from the underworld of Jewish society, who roam in packs across Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, pining and longing for the messiah Sabbatai Sevi, who imbues them from a distance with some quality of oddness, even before they have met him in the flesh.

Most of the characters in the novel deliberately lack a decisive character; they are rather elusive and play second fiddle to the hero. They meet Nehemiah at different crossroads and in changing functions along his adventurous and fantastical obstacle course to the messiah in Constantinople and back.

Alongside these human players, the author adds secondary figures from the animal world that add to the atmosphere of fantasy. A dog called Bird, a rhyming parrot called The Rabbi, and above all a secondary character so important that he appears on the book cover: the human bear, or the ursine human, who serves as a clear metaphor for all the shady characters in the novel. The hero Nehemiah has six fingers on his right hand, and on almost every page in the book he passes this hand through his straight beard in a magical gesture. Although he is supposed to be a conventional Polish rabbi, in practice he shows signs of personality disorder and commits almost every possible transgression on his way to the messiah; whether he does so willingly or under duress is left to the reader to decide. The content of his fateful encounter with Sabbatai Sevi is cloaked in obscurity until the end of the plot, when the entire tale is recounted by the sexton from Amsterdam, who actually serves as the tangible historical figure underpinning the entire novel.

In order to draw his characters and their world closer to the Hebrew reader, Meyer equips his heroes with an interesting linguistic blend. Sometimes they speak a rich Hebrew, replete with rhyming verses and Midrashic quotes in the spirit of the sages; sometimes they speak an insolent gutter jargon, though we all know that such a Hebrew did not exist at the time. The hero of the novel occasionally employs contemporary slang: “You’re a real one, you are,” and he also utters the phrase that heads this article. But all this does not obscure the author’s outstanding mastery of the Jewish languages of the time. The Ottomans are called “Tugrama;” the term “Greeks” refers to the Cossacks; and the Tatars are “Qedarites.” Even the Ukrainians do not speak Ruthenian, but “Goyish” (just as Latin is referred to in Yiddish as *Gelakhes*, the language of the *galakhim* or priests).

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We now move on to the historiographic position embedded in the novel. Gershom Scholem long ago established that Sabbatianism was the most subversive challenge to the Halakhic establishment during the centuries before the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In his novel, Yakov Z. Meyer the historian seeks to propose a different approach, and to suggest that the Halakhah and Sabbatianism did not walk along entirely separate paths. The character most closely identified with Polish Halakhic rulings is Rabbi David Halevy Segal, the author of the *Turei Zahav*, and both the rabbi and his work play a central role in the plot. The author of the *Turei Zahav* supported Sabbatai Sevi, and even sent his son to ask Sabbatai for a blessing and healing (according to the source on which Meyer relies, this incident indeed occurred).

The author shapes Nehemiah as a character who mediates between Halakhah and Sabbatianism, seeking to enjoy the best of both worlds. He is not only a “Ba’al Shem,” that is to say an itinerant healer trading in spells and amulets; he is also a scholar and a well-read gentleman, an admirer of the Halakhah who was close to the author of *Turei Zahav* and other Halakhic arbiters. Through all his adventures, Nehemiah seeks to publish Halakhic texts, including some he obtained by less than kosher means.

This novel, then, presents the viewpoint that the Halakhah and Sabbatianism were two authoritative political forces that acted in tandem on the Jewish world. As a marginal character, Nehemiah seeks to make a profit from both worlds, though he does so in his own roundabout manner. And so his way become entangled, complicated by every possible obstacle, and we are left with the sense that the reasons for his conversion to Islam, like all his other decisions, were not clear even to Nehemiah himself.

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The novel Nehemiah has continued to create shockwaves in the Israeli press and the social media for many months. In a Facebook post, the critic Hagai Ben Arza made the following interesting observation:

“The book plays heavily on the narrow boundary between truth and lie. Indeed, the choice to weave a work of fiction around historical figures inevitably creates a constant tension that urges us to get to the bottom of things: is this truth or fiction? A falsehood or a substantiated fact? And no-one lives more on this tension that the literary figure of Nehemiah. In simple terms, he is a trickster. Trickery is not merely his livelihood, but a psychological attitude. Nehemiah is never free from doubts regarding his own motives, and this shapes his profound skepticism toward others, including those closest to him (if anyone can be close to him). The apple-selling scene from his childhood offers us the origins of this cynical approach, and the fact that Nehemiah himself then goes on to become a trickster is a classic example of intergenerational transfer.”

Thus the truly sophisticated part of the plot comes at the only moment when Nehemiah loses his doubts, indeed loses his world, and realizes that he has been outmaneuvered by a superior trickster. His response to this move is to relinquish completely any control, over his own life or that of others.

The American psychologist Steven Becker argued that society’s attitude toward the victims of fraud is based on victim blaming – since the victim failed to identify the warning signs, they received the punishment they deserved. The purpose behind this attitude is to prevent the danger that we ourselves will fall victims to trickery. It emerges that even tricksters themselves can accept this approach.

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In conclusion, Nehemiah is not the first novel that seeks to add literary color and detail to the tempest provoked by Sabbatai Sevi among the Jews in the seventeenth century. The novel’s antecedents include Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Satan in Goray* and A.S. Stein’s *Dudaei Tzevi*, along with the work of other Zionist authors. The innovation offered by this masterful novel, however, is the focus on the Polish Kabbalist Nehemiah Cohen, and the emphasis on his historical role in the game of tag between messianism and Halakhah and between the margins and the establishment. In the finest tradition of the picaresque novel, Nehemiah undergoes countless adventures rich with characters and encounters; by the time he emerges, he does not even recognize his own image in the mirror. The hero poignantly declares at the end of the novel that “he has lived his life twice, once going forward and once in reverse.” Such was the Sabbatian movement. The story of its return to the annals of history is longer than the story of its emergence; indeed, in many senses this story has not yet been completed.

The charm of messianism captivated scholars, leaders, and writers in the Zionist generation. Most of them chose to depict Nehemiah through the prism of traditional conservatism, the stream that ultimately led to the downfall of Sabbatai Sevi. What place do Sabbatianism or messianism have in our own times? The author piques our interest about such questions, but offers no real answer – and perhaps there is no need for such.