

great rabbi, physician, and philosopher, was asked what an observant Jew should do if threatened with death should he or she refuse to convert. His pragmatic "Letter Concerning Apostacy," which stated that the Jew might simulate conversion and wait patiently until the oppressor's fanaticism eased and he/she could return to Jewish practice, helped ensure the Jews' survival.

Beaten down by the Crusades, blood libels, and other travails, Jews of the 13th and 14th centuries were ready to be empowered by a new mystic movement called Kabbalah. The Zohar (splendor), a mystical commentary on Torah written by Moses de Leon of Spain, stressed the power of prayer, atonement, and other techniques (astrology, numerology, angels, demons, etc.) to break Satan's grip on humankind, after which the Messiah would be free to arrive, bringing God's redemption. Suddenly each brow-beaten Jew could become a fighter in the battle to bring God's kingdom, through study and meticulous observance of Torah as well as continuous self-examination and purification. The Kabbalah

movement enriched Judaism by giving people hope, joy, purpose, and strength in their struggle to reach God, but it also made use of amulets, exorcisms, talismans, and other superstitions. Among its far-reaching effects: a strong messianic movement and the later development of Chasidism.

False Messiah

In the 17th century a wave of murderous pogroms tore through the world's most populous Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Russian Cossacks fighting for freedom from their Polish overlords wiped out some 300,000 Jews along their way. In subsequent invasions by Russia and Sweden, Poland was dismembered. Pogroms would rage for another hundred years. Amidst this chaos arose a charismatic, would-be messiah, Sabbatai Zvi, who inspired Jews across Europe, Asia, and Africa to sell their belongings in anticipation of returning to the Holy Land. In 1666, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire forced Zvi to convert to Islam, unleashing a wave of Jewish despair. In Europe

people huddled into knots of fierce orthodoxy. Much of the learning became drill, dry memorization of holy books. Scholars engaged in obtuse arguments about words that had little to do with people's everyday lives. The joy was gone—until Rabbi Israel Eliezer, later known as the Baal Shem Tov (master of a good name), brought it back.

Chasidism

As a young man, Israel Eliezer earned a meager living by bringing little boys to religious school. After he married, he and his wife moved to a village in the Carpathian Mountains, where he dug lime that his wife sold in nearby towns. In the mountains, Israel studied Kabbalah, prayed, and came to believe that God was everywhere: in every rock, leaf, squirrel, and person. And since God was good, actual or potential good existed in all things. The world was full of beauty, melody, and joy. And one's prayers were not as important as one's love of and devotion to God. In the mid-1730s, Eliezer brought his beliefs to the shtetls

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