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A HITHERTO UNKNOWN MESSIANIC MOVEMENT
AMONG THE JEWS, PARTICULARLY THOSE OF
GERMANY AND THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE.

THE remarkable letter which, no doubt, came to Oxford from the enchanted hoard of the Geniza at Cairo, and which, thanks to Dr. A. Neubauer, has been communicated to the public in the *JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW*, IX, 27-29, reminds us of the potsherd mentioned in the Talmud (*Jebamot*, 92^b), underneath which a pearl was found. The newly discovered document is as mysterious as an equation with three unknown quantities, or as an enigma which it is impossible to solve. We do not learn anything about the place where the letter was written, nor whither it was directed, nor to whom it was written. The very fact that it appears to have been written in the Byzantine Empire—a part of the globe where the mediaeval history of the Jews is more unknown than anywhere else—makes us despair of being able to elucidate this obscure relic, which gives us, in every name it contains, a new riddle to solve.

Yet, on closer inspection, we hit upon points which assist us in fixing the time and place of the events described there, with that amount of certainty which history is at all able to attain; and thus a forgotten and buried chapter of Jewish history is brought to light, which must be designated as most memorable and far-reaching.

The clue to the solution is furnished in this case by the name of the Head of the College, Rabbi Abiathar ha-Cohen. But the way in which the name is given is confusing. He is said to have sent the letter from Tripolis to Constantinople.

Are we to assume that the letter was written in Tripolis, or that the sender, Abiathar, lived there? Was he an African or a Palestinian? Because it is impossible to decide which Trablus is meant here. Fortunately, the name of Abiathar is exceedingly rare in Jewish literature¹. If, therefore, we come across a Rabbi Abiathar, who is also mentioned to have been a Cohen and the Head of a College, we may assert with a degree of probability, bordering upon certainty, that we have met with the Abiathar of our letter. Now, a Rabbi of that description did exist. The St. Petersburg MS. of the grammatical work *Mushtamil* was copied for Eliahu ha-Cohen in the year 1423 of the Seleucidean era, i. e. in 1112, in Fostat, i. e. Old Cairo; and this Eliahu is described there as the son of Rabbi Abiathar ha-Cohen, Head of the College, and as a grandson and great-grandson of Gaonim². At that year Rabbi Abiathar was already dead. The title Head of the College, by which he is distinguished, denotes that he had been at the head of the Jews of Egypt, and that he performed all the duties which we find connected with the dignity of Nagid. We recognize in him a leading figure among the Jews in the midst of his activity, from the letter itself, in which it is supposed that all important messages referring to the Jewish community would reach him first. We see at a later period that the Jewish congregations placed all questions referring to Messianic subjects, or to movements among the ten tribes, before the Nagid of Egypt³; thus was Isaac Cohen Sholal still considered as an oracle on that class of subjects⁴. In the same way the message of salvation here is expected first from Rabbi Abiathar. Perhaps he was not called Nagid yet, if we rightly understand the information that the Vizier

¹ Cf. Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte der Synagogalen Poesie*, p. 704 (=Nachtrag, p. 38).

² Bacher, in the *Revue des Études Juives*, XXX, 235, where אביתר must be read for אביתר.

³ Kaufmann, in the *JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW*, vol. IV, p. 505.

⁴ ר' יצחק, IV, 32 sq.

Chalif al-Afdhal had given Rabbi Meborach the title of "Prince of Princes," i.e. the official character of a Nagid, for the first time¹. Rabbi Abiathar had the title of "Head of the College," i.e. Head of the house of study of the "Pride of Jacob" or Gaon².

But it requires two points to describe a line; we can, in the same way, arrive at complete certainty only by fixing a second point. Who is Rabbi Tobias, who is all along distinguished by the words "our teacher," and who has played a leading part among the Jews of Salonichi? Not "probably," but "undoubtedly³," Tobias b. Eliezer, the author of the invaluable compilation of Midrashim and interpretations to the five books of Moses and the five Scrolls, entitled *Lekach Tob*. This assumption fixes the period of Rabbi Abiathar's activity as the end of the twelfth century, whilst, at the same time, it exhibits Rabbi Tobias in a new light. We know now that this scholar, a native of Castoria in Bulgaria, was perhaps Chief Rabbi at Salonichi, and we are sure that he was an influential person there. We learn even something about his relations, namely, that his nephew, the son of his brother Judah, who bore the name of his father, a man distinguished by later generations with the honourable name of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, also lived in Salonichi, where, according to a legend, Elijah the Prophet appeared to him and gave him presents. We are now no longer obliged to look for Rabbi Eliezer the Great⁴ in Mayence; we meet him on Byzantine soil, where Rabbi Tobias had originally lived and worked.

But the letter, so obscure at first sight, supplies us also

¹ Vide JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, vol. IX, p. 36, וישם שמו שר הדשרים ונתנוהו שר על בני ישראל אשר במלכותו. Nathanael, who was personally known by Benjamin of Tudela, is also quoted by the latter as רבי נתנאל שר הדשרים ראש הישיבה.

² Cf. A. Harkavy, *Studien und Mittheilungen*, III, 29, and IV, 414, Index. s. v., and Kaufmann, *Revue des Études Juives*, XVII, 304.

³ Neubauer, l.c., p. 26.

⁴ Cf. S. Buber, מורש לקח טוב (Wilna, 1881), I, p. א'.

with a date. The writer, Menachem ben Eliah, declares, towards the end, that he was unable to come "thither," which we now know means "to Cairo," because the armies of the Germans were in constant motion, without anybody being able to tell in which direction they would ultimately march. Now, the personalities as fixed by us brought us to the beginning of the twelfth century; this information can, therefore, refer only to the first crusade, which brought the hosts from Germany into the Byzantine Empire. They were first called thither by the Emperor Alexius Comnenus for the deliverance of Jerusalem from the hands of the Seldjuks, but were afterwards received by him with fear and trembling. The period alluded to must be more especially the autumn of 1096, at which time the German crusaders were still separated from the others, and extended their raids as far as the neighbourhood of Nicaea, where they met with their fate¹. We are therefore pretty safe if we fix the date of the letter as 1096.

But we must be on our guard, and not confuse the Germans mentioned at the end of our document with the Germans referred to at the beginning. This was, however, done by Dr. Neubauer², and through this error he was unable to get a clear understanding of the historical disclosures offered by this letter. It is impossible, in this case, that by "the Germans" the crusaders are meant. For the latter would under no consideration have taken their wives and children, and certainly not their wealth, with them. It was rather their custom to leave their debts behind them, and it was on no occasion a particular desire on their part to wait for the movement of the lost ten tribes before departing for the Holy Land.

The Germans mentioned by Menachem ben Eliah at the beginning of his letter are German Jews. However much

¹ Vide Buber, l. c., p. 16 sqq.; Neubauer, l. c., 26, considers him to be the one of Mayence.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

exaggerated the number of Jews may be who are said to have emigrated in their thousands, so much is certain that it must have been a powerful movement which had taken hold of the German Jews in the year 1096, and induced a host of them to start for Palestine by way of the Byzantine Empire. Both the Jews and Christians of the Greek Empire were at a loss to understand the motives that had induced these hosts to leave home and hearth. When questioned, they probably answered by quoting Jeremiah xxxi. 7, a verse which had set them wandering with a mysterious force. They thought that the advent of the Messiah was predicted there to take place in the 256th lunar cycle (יָרֵךְ)¹: "Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout at the head of the nations: proclaim it, praise, and say, Save, O God, thy people, the remnant of Israel." This promise they kept constantly before their eyes, and thus an insatiable yearning was stirred up in all circles of European Jews, which ultimately vented itself, in the eleventh year of the Messianic jubilee cycle, in a universal migration to the Holy Land. Their minds were in a state of excitement, the tension and expectation had reached the fever-point; as a matter of course, the tokens were not wanting which from time immemorial were connected in the mind of the believing multitude with the advent of the Messiah. It was told that the ten tribes, behind their dark mountains², had commenced stirring, and wished to unite with their brethren, from whom they had been so long separated. Geographical distances disappear in the minds of those who foster Utopian dreams; and thus Menachem ben Eliah makes the Jews of Germany relate that the dark mountains, situated near their own country, had all at once become lit up before them with great brilliancy.

¹ Hebraeische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge, edd. *Neubauer-Stern*, pp. 1, 36, 81, 153.

² דְּרֵי הַרְוֵךְ. Cf. Josippon, ii. 10; Rashi to Amos, iv. 3; Petachja of Regensburg (vide *Travels*, ed. A. Benisch, pp. 46, 100 sq., סְבוּר הַעוֹלָם, *Tour du Monde*, ed. Carmoly, p. 77), and Abraham Jaghel in קִבְּץ עַל יַד, IV, 40.

The fact that the movement was universal, and was connected with the Messianic hopes of the year 1096, is proved by the circumstance that Menachem ben Eliah expressly states that the Jews of France¹ had at that time dispatched a special messenger to Constantinople for the purpose of obtaining reliable information about the success of the work of deliverance, and whether the time of freedom had really arrived.

Reports of a similar nature were spread in the Byzantine Empire even about the Chozars. It was told that seventeen congregations had started, and had not been deterred by a wandering through the desert, as long as they could reach those tribes who were no longer willing to abide in their safe homes.

All that had come to the knowledge of Menachem ben Eliah of Messianic hopes and the intended realization of them, appeared to him premature and rash, and in opposition to the prophetic word of Micah iv. 12, that the gathering of Israel to the threshing-floor of the Holy Land was to precede the great day of the deliverance. But now the time seemed to have arrived when the threshing-floor would be full; for a mysterious migration had moved Israel in all places, in order to lead them together to Zion.

The tokens also, which only a short time ago were held in light esteem, in consequence of the blindness and false wisdom of the people, became now true and credible. Small gatherings, congregations consisting of members all feverish with Messianic excitement, had arisen in Abydos², who stated that they had seen signs and wonders, who told of the appearance of the prophet Elijah, who had come to them as the harbinger of the Messianic era. But the congregation of Constantinople, and the not less important

¹ מארץ פראנקניאן. The Arabic name for France is usually written אפרנגה; cf. Moses b. Ezra's *Rhetorics* in Harkavy's נודים, p. 103; צרחה אפרנגה וצפוד אלמודלם בלסאן אלערב.

² אירדן, according to new-Greek pronunciation, and in the accusative, which is frequently used in names of places in later time.

unnamed congregation in which the writer of our letter lived—Smyrna, Adrianople, or whatever other town it may have been—gave no ear to the impatient fanatics, and found themselves in duty bound to excommunicate them.

But now the signs of the deliverance showed themselves continuously and irrefragably. Christians and Jews, citizens and magistrates¹ of the town of Salonica, attested loudly that at that place men, whose trustworthiness was above suspicion, had themselves seen Elijah, not in a dream, but in the flesh, and when awake. Signs and wonders were believed to have appeared suddenly in great numbers. A grandson of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, the son of the latter's son Rabbi Jehudah, and nephew of Rabbi Tobias, the great teacher and revered Rabbi of Salonica, was able to show a staff handed him by the prophet Elijah, the great forerunner of the Messiah. Rabbi Tobias himself had caught the excitement. In a message to Constantinople, entrusted by him to one of his disciples, he gave a narrative of the wonderful events and incidents. Michael Jenimtseh, i. e. the German, a fellow-citizen of Menachem ben Eliah, had himself read Rabbi Tobias's letter to Constantinople, from which he gained the information that the learned Michael ben Aaron², who was known to Rabbi Nissim—evidently the head of the congregation to which Menachem ben Eliah originally belonged—as a man blind in both eyes, and who lived in Salonica, had recovered his eyesight during that period of signs and wonders. It is unfortunate that Michael Jenimtseh forgot to take a copy of Rabbi Tobias's letter home with him; but he was a well-instructed man, who can be fully trusted with having been able to reproduce correctly and faithfully the contents of the letter, which was evidently written in Hebrew.

Constantinople was the focus in which all the rays of this movement centred. Another message also reached that

¹ Thus I think אכסניים ושלטוניים ought to be translated.

² Neubauer, *ibid.*, p. 26, calls him Ben Aaron, through a misunderstanding of the text.

city, and great importance must have been attached to it, as having come from the Holy Land, the scene of the development of events in the near future. The head of the school of Egypt, the teacher and guide of the Egyptian Jews, Rabbi Abiathar ha-Cohen, had received a letter from Trablus in Palestine, obviously referring to this new Messianic movement¹. He forwarded it to Constantinople by a Christian messenger of the name of Lugos. Four men of the congregation to which Menachem ben Eliah belonged had seen that letter in his possession, but they also neglected to take at once a copy which they might have taken home with them. But Menachem ben Eliah was certain that he could expect shortly a copy both of this epistle, of which the four ignorant men had omitted to take a copy, and of the letter of Rabbi Tobias, of which mention had been made to him by the learned Michael.

The greatest impression was produced by the report that the Jews of Salonica were suddenly enabled to enjoy complete security and confidence. In the very hotbed of hatred of the Jews, of which Rabbi Nissim may, from his own experience, have told many a tale, a Messianic and divine peace had settled, as if it had come down from heaven. Its Jewish inhabitants, enveloped in their Talith, fasting, and intent upon works of piety, had commenced to renounce their worldly occupations.

It could not but be considered as a miracle that in a place where no Jew enjoyed security of existence, nor any of the ordinary joys of life, the congregation was able to indulge without hindrance in their fanatic expectations, and was all at once exempt from taxes; the poll-tax and the double census², which may have been exacted from them double as from the Jews of the Holy Roman Empire, not being at that time exacted from them. This could only have

¹ This is indicated by the phrase כהן מפורש מן ישראלים.

² خراج = גולגולתה = *Charadj* or poll-tax, ענינים, which the vocalization shows to be a dual, may mean, like קנס, census.

been brought about in a miraculous way, and by warning from above. The Emperor or, as the writer, went to use Arabic terms, says, the Sultan¹, Alexius Comnenus himself, and the Patriarch², were believed to have extended their support to the Jews. They should only sell their houses and chattels, and follow the Messianic call, without let or hindrance. Had the report about the expedition of the ten tribes reached the Emperor of the Byzantine Empire also? Did the orthodox Alexius give some amount of credence to the tales of the great Jewish force about the Sambation, and fear the latter as the avengers of all the injustice done to the Jews, in the same way as, at a later period of history, the Popes Martin V and Clement VII were inclined to take these traditions seriously? Some belief in the protection or, at least, the connivance from the highest quarters must have been alive among the Jews of the Byzantine Empire; for the same people who, only a short time before, endeavoured to suppress and keep secret every manifestation of Messianic hopes, now showed a bold front and dared openly to avow their aspirations to the whole world.

Menachem ben Eliah was now himself intent openly to await, with his native community, the work of deliverance, and to further it by acts of pious devotion. Fasting and penance became the order of the day. There were many

¹ Other Arabisms, like p. 28, l. 7, at the bottom: **وكيف** = **ויאך** or **וכיף**, p. 29, l. 6, **من عند** = **מאצל**, show the influence of the Arabic dialect, which came so natural to the writer that he used it, p. 27, l. 18, **تكلّموا بان** = **הכלמו באן**. The names **קוסטנטייה** and **שלוניקייה** show also this Arabic colouring.

² **והאבמון הגרול**, literally, "the great archbishop." This mode of spelling the word shows that **הבמון** was the later designation of "archbishop," and confirms the correctness of the reading in the Chronicle of Oria (vide *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, ed. Neubauer, II, 120, l. 18) **ועבר לו והאבמון**, which one might feel inclined to consider a mistake for **והארמני**. A later tradition, in its translation of **כפה והבמון** into "bishop and archbishop," still held to this meaning of **אבמון**. Vide Grünbaum, *Jüdisch-Deutsche Chrestomathie*, 38, 529, 544.

who fasted daily; others kept regularly the Mondays and Thursdays as fasts; they scourged themselves, and there was no end to the confessions of sins. Formerly, they used to be anxious to conceal all reports of Messianic visions that appeared either to Jews or to Christians; but such reports assumed now an unheard-of significance, and were loudly proclaimed. Thus, long before the reports from Salonica had attracted universal notice, at a time when profound peace prevailed, a Jew of the tribe of Aaron maintained that he had received in a dream the prophecy that all the Jews of *Romania*, i.e. the Byzantine Empire¹, were to assemble at Salonica, and thence to set forth on the great expedition. At that time this man had to submit to severe reproaches for his vision; like all dreamers, he was considered as God's enemy, who was guilty of arbitrarily and presumptuously dreaming of the deliverance, and of being desirous to "hasten the day of the Lord²." But now Tobias from Thebes³ appeared with the message from Salonica, that at that place signs and wonders had really appeared, and that other congregations had in truth assembled there. This Tobias was shortly to come also to Cairo to give an account of his experiences in these events. That which the Aaronite had vaguely seen in a dream had now become reality.

Menachem ben Eliah's only desire now was to obtain the confirmation of those forebodings of the approaching advent of the Messiah which were announced from the Holy Land from Rabbi Abiathar of Cairo, for it was supposed that in

¹ Cf. Zunz, *Die Ritus*, p. 79 c.

² The obscure words ? ואך ? שואני י' הם ואמרנו כי seem to have this meaning.

* תיקון. In Charizi's *Tachkemoni*, ed. Lagarde, p. 92, Michael b. Kaleb the poet is said to be בני חבץ. I take this opportunity for correcting the corrupt rhymes of this passage from my old MS. of the *Tachkemoni*: ולעמים ימלך : כהם אחר מזיר, אשר דאל שכלו ייער. Dr. Neubauer, p. 26, says that "Tobiah of Thebes was *perhaps* not identical with Rabbi Tobiah." Of course, the messenger, a native of Thebes, who visited Salonica for a very short time only, has nothing whatever in common with the Rabbi of Salonica.

his circle all information and messages received were duly accredited. The fear¹ of spreading reports of that nature no longer existed, the narratives of these events having even reached the ears of the Emperor, who had received them without prejudice against the Jews, but, on the contrary, in a rather friendly and favourable spirit. Only then, when the confirmation by Rabbi Abiathar of the message of salvation would have arrived, the preparations for the work of deliverance would be recommenced to their full extent. Menachem ben Eliah says, in conclusion, that he was about to come himself to Cairo, but that the raids of the German armies—evidently the crusaders—of which nobody could say in what direction they would be undertaken, had prevented him from doing so.

It seems that a letter of Rabbi Nissin or Nissim, who most likely also made inquiries at Cairo about the same matter, was enclosed in that of Menachem².

With this, all information about an event which must have stirred the Jews of Europe far and wide, suddenly ceases. But this rapid flash of light, as rapidly extinguished, suffices to give a new and lucid illustration to the tragedy of Jewish history during the first crusade. A dreadful awakening was to follow the Messianic dream of the European Jews. The year 1096 brought them, instead of the longed-for meeting with the lost tribes, the most terrible calamity that had befallen them since the destruction of the Temple. They met with the murderous brutality of the crusaders. Instead of witnessing the assembly of the dispersed on the promised soil, they saw enormous hordes pouring into the Holy Land through depopulated Jewries and over thousands of Jewish corpses. The threshing-floor was full, the signs had not spoken false ;

¹ For the fact that the fear of involving the Jewish congregations in difficulties with their governments on account of such reports existed also at a later period ; vide קבץ על יר, IV, p. 33, l. 3 ; p. 31, l. 18 ; and JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, vol. IV, p. 507 : ונפלה אימת מלכות ארזים עלינו על רוח דנא :

² This may be the sense of the otherwise unintelligible remark : וז הכתוב : מאצל דרב המובהק מר ורז ניסין טפ :

but it was the hordes of enemies who had held a harvest of death in Israel.

It certainly was not the first movement called forth by the hopes of a rising of the ten tribes, especially among the Jews of the German Empire; but it was the first movement of the kind of which we have any information, thanks to this newly discovered document. We now see what a hold the belief in the saviours behind the dark mountains must have had on the hearts of the Jews of Germany, and that only an impulse, a tenaciously spread rumour, was enough to arouse the slumbering yearning and incite to action. It was only with the German Jews that the legend could originate of a miraculous deliverance, at a time of dire religious oppression, by a brother from the tribe of Dan, who would suddenly appear among them as an angel from heaven, in order to defeat, by his wisdom and his superiority in religious debate, the priest who had conjured up all the danger¹. The belief in the ten tribes prevailed so strongly among the Jews of Germany, that not even the horrible awakening by the terrors and deathblows of the crusades was strong enough to dispel the dream. Thus only we understand what Benjamin of Tudela tells us at the end of his *Itinerary*, that he found the pious congregations of Germany so deeply imbued with the conviction of an early deliverance, that they only waited, as it were, for a stimulus in order to

¹ Abraham Jaghel, קבץ על יר, IV, 39, tells of a Megilla, which he had seen in the house of Gershom b. Abraham Cohen Porto in Mantua, in which the miraculous deliverance of the Jews of Germany was recorded. That scroll was said to be read on Pentecost in all German congregations. In the letter of the Rabbis of Jerusalem to the *Beni Moshe*, of the year 1830, the deliverer of the German Jews is said to be Dan, one of the *Beni Moshe*. Vide *ibid.*, 54. Juda b. Abraham of Cologne, who died as a martyr on June 27, 1096, at Altenahr (?), and who, on account of great influence, is praised in high-flown terms as the leader of the congregation of Cologne, is said to have been of the tribe of Dan, יהוה היה משבט דני. But the expression seems to me to indicate that he performed the functions of the chief of the Beth-Din. Vide *Hebraeische Berichte*, pp. 20, 22. At 1565 we find in Turin an Italian rabbi by name Nathanael b. Schabbatai כמששוח דני. Compare *Mortara אישליא חכמי אישליא*, p. 19.

assemble and leave the country. "Rejoice, brethren—thus they greet their guests from distant parts—for God's help comes in a moment. If we had not been afraid that the end had not yet approached, we should already have bestirred ourselves. But we cannot yet do so till the spring will have arrived, and the voice of the turtledove will have been heard, and the messengers of deliverance come and speak for ever: God be highly praised!" In the letters they write to each one they say: "Keep steadfast to the Law of Moses. There you find mourners for Zion and mourners for Jerusalem, who implore God's mercy, and cover themselves with black garments, and pray to God." Scarcely a hundred years had elapsed since very un-Messianic horrors, perpetrated by abandoned assassins, had made an end of Messianic fanaticism and voluntary emigration, when Benjamin found them again ready to form new enterprises in the same direction. And after scarcely another hundred years, towards the end of the thirteenth century, troops of German Jews again left home and hearth, fired by Messianic messages, unconcerned about the evil consequences to their brethren that remained behind, and the wrath of the Emperor, which was to fall as a flash of lightning upon the head of the German Jews, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg.

Thus it becomes more and more evident that the romance of the ten tribes is not a literary fiction, but a conviction and hope, entering deeply into Jewish life, frequently manifesting itself as a powerful historical motor, pervading all parts of the Diaspora, and mostly so in the German congregations that were famous for their piety. From Eldad ha-Dani till David Reubeni the stream of these Messianic aspirations, which so often imperilled the calm and steady development of Israel, flows on, and if the regular course of it seems so often to be lost to us, still recent discoveries always show us the traces of its continuity.

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