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Tevie Kagan: The Enigmatic R. David Lida Part II

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The Enigmatic R. David Lida Part II
by Tevie Kagan

R. David of Lida and Sabbateanism

The case for Sabbatean leanings in R. David ben Aryeh Leib of Lida's works are somewhat cloudy. The first clear accusation in this regard is from R. Yaakov Emden in his *Toras Hakanaos*. [1] Specifically, R. Emden, dealt with the conclusion of one of Lida's poem's entitled *Shir Hillulim*, which was printed with his *Migdol David*. *Shir Hillulim* was written in honor of a torah dedication in Amsterdam in 1680. It was comprised of verses to be recited by the congregation and cantor. The letters at the end that are enlarged spell out "Tishbi," and says "Tishbi, he will redeem us." In traditional Jewish literature, Tishbi (Elijah) is referenced as a forerunner for the messiah. Emden saw this as an allusion to Shabbetai Zevi, as the letters in "Tishbi" form "Shabbetai" when transposed. Emden continues and notes that the letters between the last lines (spelling out "David") demonstrate that Lida was attempting to equate David with Tishbi, and, consequently, with Shabbetai Zevi.

There are those who argue with Emden's assertion that *Shir Hillulim* displays Sabbatean tendencies. Specifically, they note that David de Castro Tartas, who routinely printed prayer books and other works of sabbatean nature, [2] printed *Shir Hillulim*. Eisner, for example, postulates that Tartas added the problematic lines and that Lida knew nothing about it. [3] However, as Heller [4] points out, it would seem unlikely that a printer would modify such a small work, and that of the chief rabbi, meant for immediate distribution. Even more so, if this were the case, why would Lida use the same printer again, as he did with for his *Shomer Shabbos* in 1687?

Indeed, it is especially difficult to determine whether a work is Sabbatean in nature. Within Sabbatean writings there are certain recurring themes. There is often a thematic fixation on the Messiah. The writings often focus on King David, and explain how he did not sin with Bat-Sheba (Samuel II, Chapter 11). They also frequently discuss the concept of "*mitzvah ha-ba'ah be-averah*," the notion of reinterpreting biblical figures actions as foreshadowing Shabbetai Zevi's acts (particularly Esther or King David), and the rabbinic dictum that "greater a sin done for heavens sake than a commandment done other than for the sake of heaven." Writing about any one of these topics alone does not deem one to be a Sabbatean. However, a recurring reference to these beliefs within ones writings, combined with a less than stellar character, may deem one suspect. Coupled with actual accusations from one of the foremost experts on Sabbateanism (R. Yaakov Emden), one must be wary and investigate further.

Aside from the obvious reasons for not overtly stating the sabbatean nature of a work, inherent in Sabbateanism is the notion of a "dual nature." Scholem describes this dualism as having one side bordering on nihilism and another that is outwardly religious. Elsewhere, [5] Scholem states that "[a] double-faced nature came to be seen as a characteristic trait . . . [to] live in a high tension

between outward orthodoxy and inward antinomianism." This corresponds with the paradox that the followers of Shabbetai Zevi were left with after he apostatized in 1666. This also follows Sabbatean teachings that corrupted the Lurianic doctrine of *tikun*, using sin as the preferred medium for rectification, as opposed to *mitzvot*. Shabbetai Zevi sought to abolish many commandments, stating that since it was the messianic age they no longer were applicable. He instead preached a doctrine of "*mitzvah ha-ba'ah be-averah*," asserting that the path to a mitzvah is through a sin.[6] This is one of the many ways that Shabbetai Zevi's followers attempted to rationalize his apostasy. They argued that he was merely gathering "sparks" from within the broken shards that reside in the Islamic faith. Shabbetai Zevi advocated certain sins outright, such as eating *chelev*, the forbidden fat of an animal, and abolishing the fast of the 9th of Av (*Tisha B'Av*). Thus, it is unsurprising that it is difficult to uncover what truly is a Sabbatean work and what is not.

Migdol David was Lida's first major work that was disseminated widely. It was written on the book of Ruth and seeks to explain the Davidic lineage. *Migdol David* does have messianic tones; yet, if the author was truly a Sabbatean, one would expect to find it overflowing with Sabbatean references. Oddly enough, though, through most of the work there are few Sabbatean references. The ending lines are what lead to its Sabbatean suspicion, as they include the words "שבת בבית ה'" This verse is in of itself not problematic, but the choice of "שבת" would fit with a common trait of Sabbatean writing to identify ones work to those who knew of certain code words. This was a fairly common tactic as can be adduced from Emden's list in *Toras Hakanaos*, where many books were banned for similar reasons.[7]

Within Lida's *Sod Hashem*, a manual of the rules of *milah* (circumcision) with a running commentary called *Sharbit Hazahav*, there are a couple of problematic themes. While describing the kabalistic reasons behind mila, Lida explains that the foreskin is as an offering to Samael and, because of the phrase "*nachash efer lachmo*," the foreskin is placed in dirt. Sabbatean Kabbalah often equates the *nachash* (snake) with the messiah, as both have the same numerical value. This does not mean that every reference to the *nachash* is suspect; in this case, though, clearly equating it with Samael and the offering is odd. Slightly more problematic is the quote[8] from R. Yehoshua Heshel from Vilna that discusses the verse: "Abraham was ninety-nine years old and the Lord appeared to him" (Gen. 17: 1). He proceeds to give an interpretation explaining its significance within the *sefiros* of the numbers involved. Now, one would assume this to be the same R. Heshel under which Lida studied. However, it is R. Heshel Zoref[9] (c.1663-1700), the noted Sabbatean Kabbalist, and supposed prophet of the Sabbatean movement in Poland, to whom Lida is referring. Zoref wrote the *Sefer Ha-Zoref* where, among other things, he proclaimed himself Messiah b. Joseph and Shabbetai Zevi as Messiah b. David. Lida's quoting of Zoref is not a damning piece of evidence on its own, as it is one isolated quote, and as Naor points out,[10] classic works such as *Kav Hayashar* contain quotes from Zoref as well. Still, this does not help Lida's case.

Quite possibly the most egregious piece of suspect Sabbateanism that Lida published is the homily at the beginning of his *Be'er Esek*. [11] After discussing the Medrash that the *Yalkut Shimoni* brings in Samuel (151) that David climbed the olive crop and cried, Lida goes into detail about why David would cry and why these do not suffice as reasons. Lida brings quotes from the *Zohar* and *Peliah* that say that David did not sin with Bat-Sheba, but that rather she was prepared for him from the six days of creation and that, indeed, it was a good thing that he had relations with her. David saw himself as Adam, Bat-Sheba as Eve, and Uriah the Hittite as the *nachash*. By having relations with Bat-Sheba, David rectified the sin of Adam and the act of the Snake having relations with Eve, ultimately bringing death to this world. Next Lida equates David, Adam and Messiah, explaining how David did not sin, but in fact effected a great *tikun* (rectification). Lida continues in this vein for at least another page and a half, equating his own travails with David being maligned for taking Bat-Sheba and

running from Absalom.[12] This work is ostensibly setting out to clear his name of all Sabbatean charges, yet within the work Sabbatean charges are never mentioned, and the work opens with the epitome of a Sabbatean sermon!

Lest one think this is an isolated instance, one has but to look at much of Lida's *Ir David* to see this is more the norm than the exception. *Ir David* was Lida's magnum opus. He was only able to bring the first third to print, as he states in the introduction. Lida's son Pesachya ended up printing the entire work in Amsterdam in 1719, through the press run by Solomon Proops.[13] In the introduction Lida discusses the rabbinic claim that when the messiah comes all holidays will be nullified except for Purim. This saying had become a popular adage among the Sabbateans, since Shabbatai Zevi had abolished all holidays (including the 9th of Av), as he believed he was the Messiah. Lida proceeds to expound on a passage (#143) in the *Megaleh Amukos* (by R. Nathan Nata Shapiro) that the Merkavah Chariot is alluded to in the letters שב"ת implying, therefore, that the redemption is connected to the Jews keeping shabbos. Lida proceeds to equate this using the gematria תיו בית, שין, and דוד אלהי משיח בן דוד which equal 496. The equation of these two sets of words is suspect, since a popular "pastime" of Sabbateans was to show that Shabbetai Zevi's name was numerically similar to the numerical value of the word "messiah." If we suppose that Lida had a Sabbatean mindset, than one more passage in the introduction is suspect as well. Lida bring uses a statement from R. Isaac Luria, the *Ari*, that states that all souls stem from the same 248 souls, which are mired in impurities and *kelipot*, except those of certain individuals, one of them being the messiah. Scholem, in his article on Shabbetai Zevi in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, explains how Sabbateans viewed the messiah's soul within their own kabalistic view: [14]

"He is essentially different from all those souls which play their part in the process of *tikkun*. In fact, he was never under the authority of the Torah, which is the mystical instrument used by the power of the thoughtful light and the souls connected with it. He represents something utterly new, an authority which is not subject to the laws binding in the state of cosmic and historic exile. He cannot be measured by common concepts of good and evil and must act according to his own law, which may become the utopian law of a world redeemed. Both his history and his special task explain his behavior after he had freed himself from the prison of the *kelippah*."

This can be used as a rationale for Shabbetai Zevi's apostasy, for if his soul was not from among the "regular souls," it could not be influenced by the impurities inherent in regular souls. Accordingly, he had the ability to save those who needed to be saved. Lida ends with one of his favorite verses, "ושבתי בבית ה'" with, once again, his "favorite letters" standing out. As mentioned previously, all of this is innocuous on its own, but taken within the larger picture, gives one pause.

Within *Ir David* there are certain recurring pieces. As in his *Be'er Esek*, the concept that King David didn't sin with Bat-Sheba is an important and recurrent trope. In part 42,[15] for example, Lida argues that the reason David was perceived to have sinned was to inspire the concept of repentance in individuals. Similarly, the Israelites were perceived to have sinned by the golden calf to inspire repentance among larger groups. In part 54, Lida explains that David came to replace Adam and rectify the snake's relations with Eve. This discussion continues in part 55 where Lida discusses two interpretations of what happened with the snake and Eve, and how this affects, depending on the interpretation, our interpretation of whether or not David sinned. Lida continues with this theme in part 58, which also combines one of Lida's favorite aspects of David's life, that of David being persecuted by Absalom (perhaps a reference to Shabbetai Zevi or Sabbateans being persecuted). In part 64 we are reminded that King David knew he was not sinning and that, on the contrary, he was eventually rewarded with a spot in the *merkavah* with the forefathers. Part 86 continues this theme by asserting that David, Moses, and the Israelites all did not sin because their motivations were right; through this, Lida sets forth the concept of "better a sin done for the sake of heaven than a mitzvah done with the wrong intention." Finally, part 88 references the Talmud in Shabbos 56 that asserts that anyone who says David sinned is wrong, as well as referencing a passage in the Assarah Maamaros that discusses why David's name is not invoked in prayer.

If one views Lida as a Sabbatean, then David is not the one speaking, but rather the Messiah, Shabbetai Zevi. [16] This further complicates much of Lida's sermons, since this implies that he is no longer merely using Psalms as a springboard for simple rabbinic-homiletic discourse; on the contrary, this gives everything he states a double meaning.

It cannot be disputed that Lida was a great scholar and a prolific author. Whether he plagiarized works or held Sabbatean beliefs remains up for discussion. However, much of his writing lends proof to the fact that he did. Why his works are still in print today, as opposed to the works of other possible Sabbateans, has more to do with the luck that Lida had of being reprinted early on by the Hasidic Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh of Liska (1808-1874) (and why a Hasidic rabbi chose to latch on to such a controversial figure may have to do with the similar ideological mindset of early Hasidism and Sabbateanism). [17]

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[1] Emden, *Toras Hakanaos* (Amsterdam, 1752), 71b

[2] See *Rosenthaliana Studia*- <http://cf.uba.uva.nl/nl/publicaties/treasures/text/t18.html>

[3] Eisner, *Toldot ha-Goan Rabbi Dovid Lida*, pg.12

[4] pg.123

[5] 'Shabbetai Zevi,' *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, pg.1251

[6] See Scholem, *Mitzvah Habah Beaverah: Mechkarim Umekoros Letoldos Hashabsaut Ugilgoeha* (Jerusalem, 1982)

[7] For an examination/explanation of Emden's list, see S.Z. Leiman, *Sefer Hazikaron R. Moshe Lipshitz* (New York, 1996)

[8] David Lida, *Sod Hashem* (Kiryath Joel, 2002), pg. 25

[9] Strashun, *Mivhar Kesavim* (Jerusalem, 1995), pg.128, n 2

[10] Betzalel Naor, *Post-Sabbatian Sabbatianism* (Spring Valley, 1999), pg.43

[11] Aaron Freimann, *Sefer Hayovel for Nahum Sokolow* (Warsaw, 1904), pg. 464

[12] While this is most probably just a standard writer's convention, it lends credence to Emden's contention that Lida may have had some messianic aspirations. See Emden's *Toras Hakanaos*, discussing *Shir Hillulim*.

[13] For more about Solomon Proops, see Richard D. Abraham, "Selomoh Proops, Corrector or Copyist?" *Hispanic Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3. (Summer, 1975), pp. 317-320; *Quaerendo*, Volume 37:2 (April, 2007), pg. 96-110; Marvin J Heller, *Printing the Talmud: A History of the Individual Treatises Printed from 1700*

[14] pg. 1242

[15] All numbers refer to the paragraphs assigned in Amsterdam edition.

[16] See Naor, *Post-Sabbatian Sabbatianism*, pg. 168, n 16

[17] See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1967), "Ninth Lecture-Hasidim: The Latest Phase"