

SEPHARDIC AND ASHKENAZIC MESSIANISM IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

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This article is dedicated to my friend Professor Avraham Grossman, an outstanding Jewish historian who deserves the highest regard not only for his intellectual achievements, but also for his exceptional personal qualities. As I already noted twenty years ago, he has taught us how to express differences of opinion with humility, impelled by the quest for truth for its own sake, and with a sense of respect for others.¹ In this essay, I set out to examine the positions of two outstanding historians with a special place in my life. Gerson Cohen was my doctoral advisor and primary mentor in the field of history, and I personally heard him espouse the well-known thesis at issue here before it reached its printed form. I still remember my reaction at the time: I was taken aback by his claim, which opposed my immediate instincts regarding the relationship between rationalism and messianic movements. But I also remember my growing sense of admiration as I came to understand the ingenuity and depth of his proposal.² Some years ago, Elisheva Carlebach, who studied with me as she began the process that ultimately led to her

- ¹ David Berger, "Heqer Rabbanut Ashkenaz ha-Qedumah," *Tarbiz* 53 (1984): 479.
- ² Cohen's article has been published four times: Gerson D. Cohen, "Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim," *Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture #9* (1967); *Studies of the Leo Baeck Institute*, ed. by Max Kreutzberger (New York, 1967), pp. 115-156; Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia, 1991); *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History*, ed. by Marc Saperstein (New York, 1992), pp. 202-233.

impressive accomplishments as a historian, wrote a sharp critique of Cohen's thesis. No one can disagree that the topic in question is of great importance, and I believe that the arguments on both sides deserve careful examination. Because I have such great respect for both the originator of the thesis and its critic, the chances that I will not slip into inappropriate formulations are greater than they might normally be, but it is not superfluous to express the hope that the image of the honoree will provide all the more protection.

What is it that Cohen claims in his article? He argues that there is a striking, almost polar, opposition between medieval Sepharad and Ashkenaz with regard to the issue of messianism. In Sepharad, we find lively discussions of messianism in the writings of commentators and intellectuals, as well as popular messianic movements. In Ashkenaz, on the other hand, there is no discussion or discourse, no ferment and no messiahs. Cohen strives to prove these assertions, and then to arrive at an explanation for the phenomenon itself.

He begins his analysis with the usual scholarly assumption that Ashkenazic Jewry had a strong connection to the Palestinian tradition, whereas Sephardic Jewry's connection was to Babylonia. Thence he proceeds to examine these two centers of early medieval Jewry, Palestine and Babylonia, for the first signs of the contrast between Ashkenazic and Sephardic attitudes toward messianism. In the Persian/Byzantine era and the beginning of the Muslim era, we find apocalyptic literature in Palestine, but no active messianic movements. Cohen's understanding is that this literature owes its existence to a sublimation of messianic energy from the world of action into the world of the imagination, to the point where it can even be viewed as a contrast to active messianism. On the other hand, Babylonia in the same period produced a number of movements with messianic characteristics, even including violent and quasi-military elements.

In Cohen's opinion, this difference between the two centers persisted throughout the Middle Ages. In the realm of straightforward activism, we can identify about a dozen messianic figures between 1065 and 1492, all of them in the Sephardic cultural orbit. We do find instances of messianic ferment in Byzantium and Sicily, but these were passing phenomena in communities that had strong ties to the Middle East. In the realm of calculations and messianic discourse, we find almost nothing in Ashkenaz. There is a letter, dated 960, from an Ashkenazic community to

the Geonim of the Land of Israel asking about certain messianic matters; but the curiosity about this topic seems to have been based on reading *Sefer Zerubbavel*, and the question about the End of Days is put together with an entirely different question about *kashrut*. One of the Crusade chronicles states that the Jews were hoping that the Messiah would arrive during the 256th cycle of the Jewish calendar (1085-1104 CE), based on Jeremiah 31:6: “Ronnu le-Ya’akov simhah” (“sing with gladness for Jacob”) where the numerical value of the first word, *ronnu*, is 256); however, this number reflects a calculation from a late Byzantine midrash. Rashi’s calculations in his commentary on the Book of Daniel actually illustrate a lack of messianic enthusiasm, since the effort to calculate the End was forced upon him by exegetical necessity and the dates that he proposes point to a redemption that is to be delayed for generations. In the last years of the fifth millennium (which ended in the Jewish year 5000, corresponding to 1240 CE), some prophecies of the imminent End begin to appear in Ashkenaz, but this is an atypical phenomenon whose character is entirely different from the rationalistic calculations produced by Sephardim. Similarly, the calculations attested in Ashkenaz tend to be based on innovative numerical equivalencies (*gimatriyyot*), which reflect a very different way of thinking from the calculations used by the Sephardic intellectuals. Finally, the migration of French rabbis to the Land of Israel in the thirteenth century emerged out of considerations that were essentially unconnected to messianic hopes.

Let us now look at Sepharad through Cohen’s lens. There, we see many calculations of the End of Days, based on rationalistic interpretations of biblical verses or rabbinic statements, on historical typology, and on astrological investigation, which was considered a scientific field of study in the Middle Ages. (Maimonides’ opposition to astrology was atypical even among philosophers.) Interest in the End of Days and the date when it will occur appears in the letter of Hasdai ibn Shaprut to the King of the Khazars; in the writings of Avraham bar Hiyya, Solomon ibn Gabirol, and Judah Halevi; in Abraham ibn Daud’s *Book of Tradition* (*Sefer ha-Qabbalah*); in Maimonides’ *Epistle to Yemen*; in Nahmanides’ *Book of the Redemption* (*Sefer ha-Ge’ullah*); and in the diverse writings of Isaac Abravanel.

Cohen connects messianic calculations and even the rise of messianic movements to rationalist modes of thought. As I have noted, I initially recoiled from this assertion; after all, our instincts do not take well to

a position which states that rationalism creates activism that appears contrary to common sense. However, Cohen explains the logic of this argument. The Sephardic rationalist was convinced that God governs the universe in accordance with principles that can be grasped by reason, whereas the Ashkenazic scholar did not presume to understand God's mind. Therefore, the Sephardic rationalist was able to delve into the complexities of the unfolding historical drama, and his intellectual efforts along these lines encouraged actual messianic movements among the masses. The Ashkenazic scholar was forced to wait until the time that God Himself would decide to redeem His people and His universe, and in an environment that was not suffused with concern about messianism, the masses, too, did not become caught up in messianic movements. In the best-case situation, an Ashkenazic Jew who yearned very much for the redemption might hope for a prophetic experience from God, or might attempt to interpret the secrets concealed in biblical verses.

Moreover, Cohen argues that these distinctions in attitude toward rationalism and messianism also explain the difference between Ashkenaz and Sepharad with regard to readiness to undergo martyrdom. The Jews of Sepharad avoided martyrdom for two basic reasons: first of all, rationalism weakened their faith to a degree that undermined the inner strength necessary to sacrifice one's life; second, they were convinced that the messiah would soon come, at which point they would be able to return to Judaism.

Finally, in a brief passage that appears almost as an aside, Cohen makes an important, even revolutionary, point in the historiography of messianism: persecutions in and of themselves do not produce messianic movements. Even a scholar who utterly rejects Cohen's basic positions must give him credit for the short passage in which he lists the major persecutions from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century and notes that not one of these produced a messianic movement. One might argue with Cohen's affirmation with respect to the expulsion from Spain and the massacres of 1648, but the basic observation remains intact in all its force, and it appears to stand unchallenged.

Cohen's article became a classic in the academic discussion of Jewish messianism in the Middle Ages, but there were nonetheless scholars who rejected his position. Israel Yuval, in his long article on the hatred that Ashkenazic Jews felt towards Christianity and the implications that he attributes to this hatred, proffered two arguments against Cohen's thesis.

First of all, if Ashkenazic Jews did not produce the sort of messianic movements that we find in other centers, this should not be seen as an expression of passivity. Ashkenazic society considered words very powerful, and so we should view their bitter curses against the gentiles and their prayers for vengeance as active messianism. Activism in the form of movements would have been redundant or perhaps even harmful. Moreover, Sephardic expressions of messianism in the realm of theory and calculations appear primarily in speculative philosophical literature, a genre that barely existed at all in Ashkenaz.³

But a broad and systematic critique of Cohen's thesis was presented by Carlebach in a lecture that she delivered in 1998.⁴ Here, then, is a summary of her argument:

1. Cohen speaks of "aggressive military activity" in the movements that arose in Persia in the first centuries of Muslim rule. In fact, as even Cohen admits in a later article, these movements were hardly organized, and they had no true military component.
2. Messianism was hardly foreign to Ashkenaz, nor was martyrdom absent in Sepharad. Furthermore, dying for the faith was not considered an expression of passivity by medieval Jews, for the martyrs first tried to save themselves in any way possible.
3. Cohen sees the Ashkenazic position as an expression of passivity on the part of the rabbinic elite, whereas he sees the active messianism of Sepharad as "popular." Thus, he overlooks the conservative messianism of the Sephardic rabbis from the time of the Geonim, on to Maimonides, and through R. Jacob Sasportas. Moreover, movements with messianic characteristics "often" took place in Ashkenaz under the leadership of the rabbinic elite itself, thus evincing a character that penetrated to the very core of communities that identified with its great rabbinic scholars; on the other hand, the movements in Sepharad often came from an anti-rabbinic sector.

³ Israel Yuval, "Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, ha-Dam ve-ha-Alilah," *Zion* 58 (1993): 60. This passage also appears in Yuval's book *Shenei Goyim be-Bitnekh* (Tel-Aviv, 2000), p. 145. See also note 19, below.

⁴ Elisheva Carlebach, *Between History and Hope: Jewish Messianism in Ashkenaz and Sepharad: Third Annual Lecture of the Victor J. Selmanowitz Chair of Jewish History*, Graduate School of Jewish Studies, Touro College (New York, 1998).

4. The use of the term “Sepharad” to embrace both the movements that arose on the fringes of Persian Jewry in the seventh century and the complex calculations born in the elitist environment of rationalist courtiers in Andalusia is highly dubious.
5. In light of a number of studies made in the past few decades pointing to cultural contacts between Ashkenaz and Sepharad, it is becoming clear that the general picture of a deep cultural divide between the Jewish centers has been exaggerated, and it is doubtful that we can use it to explain the distinctions that we are discussing.
6. A central portion of Carlebach’s lecture is devoted to an analysis of the historiography of two sixteenth-century messianic movements in the writings of various Ashkenazic and Sephardic authors:

I. Asher Laemmelein:

Carlebach points to three Ashkenazic sources and three Sephardic sources that address this movement.

On the Ashkenazic side, David Ganz portrays Laemmelein as the messiah’s herald, not as the messiah himself. At the same time, he describes significant messianic fervor in Ashkenaz that was generated by the news of the movement. An anonymous chronicle from early seventeenth-century Prague includes a short note about a rumor in 1502 regarding the Messiah that inspired mass acts of repentance. At the end of the sixteenth century, a student of R. Solomon Luria wrote that Laemmelein’s influence had extended to Ashkenaz, to Italy, and to other lands in the Christian world.

On the Sephardic side, Gedalya ibn Yahya reports that when Laemmelein died in an unredeemed world, many Jews apostatized. Yosef ha-Kohen refers to him with the biblical pronouncement, “The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is insane” (Hosea 9:7), and recounts that “the Jews flocked to him, and said: ‘This is a prophet, whom God has sent to be a ruler over his people Israel and to gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.’” Yosef Sambari, who repeated Yosef ha-Kohen’s remarks,⁵ also noted the influence of these events on “the sinners of Israel,” i.e., the apostates.

⁵ Carlebach does not note this point, although it would help support her thesis.

Christian writers who mention Laemmelein's movement view it, of course, as yet further evidence of the repeated disappointments generated by erroneous Jewish imaginings regarding the identity of the Messiah. Ashkenazic writers willfully ignore the fact that Laemmelein's failure led Jews to apostasy. In conclusion, "the historiography of the movement changes greatly based on the identity of the reporter."

Beyond the historiographical question, Carlebach notes also that despite Cohen's refusal to attribute significance to Laemmelein as well as his hypothesis that he was influenced by Sephardim, Laemmelein's recently-published writings, which were not available to Cohen, show that he was committed to Ashkenazic culture.

II. Solomon Molkho:

Ashkenazic authors tell the story of this figure only briefly, and tend to gloss over the messianic aspect. Josel of Rosheim describes Molkho as a proselyte who caused trouble for the community but also inspired acts of mass repentance. Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller discusses the ritual fringes (*tzitzit*) worn by Molkho and classifies him as a martyr, but not as a messianic claimant. David Ganz writes a brief description of Molkho with no mention of messianism. The Prague chronicle reports that there were messianic expectations in the year 1523, but makes no mention of Molkho.

In two Sephardic accounts, which are longer, the messianic moment in Molkho's life is mentioned explicitly. Yosef ha-Kohen introduces Molkho with the expression, "A shoot came forth out of Portugal" (cf. Isaiah 11:1), which has clear messianic implications. Yosef Sambari explicitly says that Molkho identified himself as the Messiah. Similarly, two Christian authors write that Molkho announced that he was the Messiah.

From these data, Carlebach reaches conclusions of decisive significance for our topic. Ashkenazim write succinct accounts of messianic events, limiting the messianic aspects of the relevant figures or ignoring it entirely, for precisely the reason that Christian writers emphasize it – namely, that any failed messianic movement strengthens the Christian argument against Judaism. In this context, Carlebach turns our attention to a comment that I once noted in the name of my student Avraham Pinsker, to wit, that Ashkenazim may have hesitated to embrace messianic activism precisely because they lived in a Christian

environment, where they were constantly forced to be on the defensive against faith in a false messiah. His original comment was made with reference to actual messianic activity, but Carlebach uses it to explain the historiographical phenomenon. She also points to a passage in *Sefer Hasidim* that warns against openness to messianic prophecies that could bring disgrace to the Jewish community.

7. Carlebach goes on to examine the messianic movements that did arise in Ashkenaz or related regions: the messianic tension in Byzantium at the time of the First Crusade; the expectations surrounding the 256th cycle of the calendar; the messianic ferment in the decades preceding the year 5000 (1240 CE); the migrations to the Land of Israel in the thirteenth century; and messianic expectation in 1337 attributed to Jews by a Christian Bavarian chronicle in a miracle story dealing with well-poisoning and host-desecration. She rejects Cohen's position that we need not deal with events recounted only in Christian sources, for the Ashkenazic tendency to downplay such incidents raises the likelihood that reliable reports will appear only in Christian writings.

In Carlebach's opinion, all the phenomena in this list show that there was a significant level of messianic activity in Ashkenaz, to the point where we can affirm that active expressions of messianic hope were no less a part of the collective personality of Ashkenazic Jewry than that of the Sepharadim. Cohen's thesis reflects a historiographical tradition hostile to Ashkenazic Jewry. Cohen sees in this Jewry a metaphor for a rabbinic elite suffused with fundamentalism and intolerance, in contrast to the scientific spirit that animated Sephardic Jewry. "The true deficiency of Ashkenaz resided not in its messianic posture, but in its deficient alignment with the temper of the historian."

Carlebach, like Cohen, was blessed with a sharp mind, broad knowledge, stylistic precision, broad vision, and intellectual depth. This debate addresses one of the fundamental issues that faced medieval Jewry, and it requires serious assessment of the arguments on both sides. In the remainder of this article, I shall attempt to present the case for a more modest approach than Cohen's without fully endorsing Carlebach's position.

Let us begin with my reservations about Cohen's arguments. Some of

these reservations are identical to Carlebach's, but most are different.

1. It is true that the Jews of Palestine, who wrote apocalypses in the first decades of the seventh century, did not form movements that pointed to any actual individuals as messianic figures; however, the word "passive" is hardly an appropriate term to characterize them. These Jews carried out military campaigns alongside the Persians against Christian Byzantium, and it is quite plausible to conclude that some of them slaughtered Christians in Mamilla.⁶ The apocalyptic writings understand these wars as part of the unfolding drama of the End of Days, and it is hard to see how any Jew who saw these events could have reject this interpretation. Even if we assume that not all the Jews who fought in these wars saw the Persian-Byzantine conflict through a messianic prism, it is clear that this community was as remote from "passivity" as East is from West.
2. In light of the Italian origins of Ashkenazic Jewry, Cohen emphasizes the fact that *Josippon*, which was written in tenth-century Italy, opposes aggressive activism, but he downplays the identical position of the Sephardi Abraham ibn Daud. (Cohen writes that while Ibn Daud did agree with the author of *Josippon* on this point, his position did not succeed in curbing the Sephardic enthusiasm for messianic movements, and Ibn Daud himself did not refrain from attempting to calculate the End.)
3. Cohen attributes great significance to Hasdai ibn Shaprut's letter asking the Khazar king whether he has any information about the coming of the Messiah. However, when he discusses a contemporaneous letter from Ashkenaz that contains almost the identical question, he sees it as nothing more than a meaningless expression of curiosity.
4. Cohen regards the intensive use of *gimatriyyot* in messianic contexts as a sign of the non-rational Ashkenazic mode of thought, but when he encounters the same approach in the writings of Abraham bar Hiyya, he views it as a marginal phenomenon.

⁶ See K. Hilkowitz, "Li-She'elat Hishtattefutam shel Yehudim be-Kibbush Yerushalayim 'al Yedei ha-Parsim bi-Shenat 614," *Zion* 4 (1939): 307-316; Elliot S. Horowitz, "'The Vengeance of the Jews was Stronger than their Avarice': Modern Historians and the Persian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614," *Jewish Social Studies* 4:2 (1998): 1-39.

5. Although Rashi's date for the End of Days lay far in the future, we find other calculations in Ashkenaz that point to a date in the near future. As to Sepharad, despite the general tendency to provide imminent dates, Nahmanides produced a calculation that postponed the final End 140 years.
6. As I have mentioned above, Cohen did not attribute significance to Laemlele's movement, and he hypothesized that it resulted from Sephardic influence. Carlebach's criticism of this claim is fundamentally correct, even though the movement did not arise in the heartland of Ashkenaz, and dates from the early sixteenth century.
7. I agree with Carlebach that the supposed connection between Sepharad and the peripheral movements in Persia is extremely tenuous. Moreover, it is highly doubtful that rationalism played any significant role in seventh-century Persia. Thus, the messianic ferment there was certainly based on factors that had absolutely nothing to do with Cohen's thesis. If the messianic activity in Sepharad was actually connected to Persia – or "Babylonia" – it reflected a tradition that had no connection to scientific modes of thinking. It is entirely possible that these movements developed in Persia under Shi'ite influence (as Israel Friedlaender noted many years ago), and it is not impossible that some of the medieval movements – though not all of them – were also inspired by a similar environment.⁷
8. Our list of messianic movements in the Middle Ages is partly based on the reports of Maimonides in his *Epistle to Yemen*. Needless to say, the information which Maimonides had about these movements came mainly from the Sephardic world.
9. Although a number of studies have appeared emphasizing the acts of martyrdom that occurred in the Sephardic sphere, I believe that we can say that Cohen's distinction between the two centers still retains some validity. Nevertheless, the connection between messianism and the relative reluctance in Sepharad to

⁷ In a personal conversation, Mark Saperstein has stressed this possibility to me. I think that many of the parallels suggested by Friedlaender are forced, but some of them are entirely reasonable. See Israel Friedlaender, "Jewish-Arabic Studies," *JQR* .n. s. 1 (1910-1911):183-205; 2 (1911-1912): 481-516; 3 (1912-1913): 235-300.

die a martyr's death is exceedingly tenuous and borders on the incoherent. On the one hand, Cohen describes a belief marked by uncertainty, and on the other, he points to a belief so strong that those who held it were prepared to convert out of firm conviction that the Messiah would come in the immediate future to save them from their distressing fate. Moreover, a simple question arises: Would it really be a good idea to greet the messiah with the words: "Welcome, my master the king! I am your servant so-and-so, the apostate"? Although forced apostasy and willing conversion are hardly the same thing, it is worth mentioning the debate in Majorca, where a Jew became more-or-less convinced that Christianity was the true faith, but to be on the safe side, he decided to remain Jewish for a few more years, until the arrival of a messianic date that was current at the time.⁸

Despite all these considerations, I also have serious reservations about the criticisms of Cohen made by Yuval and Carlebach.

There is indeed more than a grain of truth in Yuval's assertion that curses and prayers for vengeance can be classified as messianic activism in a society that views speech as a magical act. However, the Jew in the well-known joke who shouts in the study hall, "Jews! Do something! Recite Psalms!" does not exactly typify "activism" in the usual sense, even if he attributes magical impact to the recitation of Psalms. In the final analysis, Ashkenazic Jews did not make a clear distinction between the "natural" process generated by the declarations of the Jewish masses and divine activity on the cosmic plane, so that their prayers and curses—even if they included a magical element—were essentially requests for divine mercy. Furthermore, routine messianic "activism" cannot be compared to messianic movements that arise at discrete moments of history. The messianic fervor that characterizes movements cannot characterize quotidian activities, certainly not when these activities involve nothing more than speech. As to Yuval's assertion that from a magical perspective, typical messianic activism would be harmful, the fact remains that even from this perspective the expected result is the arrival of the Messiah, so that it is difficult to see any harm in his appearance. A messianic figure and his followers do not see themselves as pressing for a premature End of Days. On the contrary, such a figure would assert that the long-

⁸ Ora Limor, *Vikkuah Majorca 1286* (Jerusalem, 1985), volume I, p. 132.

awaited time has arrived, perhaps precisely because the prayers and curses have had their effect. We must also note that Yuval's criticism is directed only against Cohen's claim that the Ashkenazic attitude toward messianism was "passive." From another perspective, Yuval's position actually reinforces Cohen's analysis since it points to a basic difference between Sephardic "rationalistic" messianism and a very different sort of messianism among Ashkenazic Jews.

As to Yuval's observation that there was virtually no speculative philosophical literature in Ashkenaz, the point itself merits serious consideration, but we must remember that when Cohen cites Sephardic materials, he includes letters, commentaries, and Abraham ibn Daud's chronicle (or chronography). Moreover, the lack of speculative philosophical works is due to a considerable extent to precisely what Cohen emphasized, to wit, the absence of speculative thought of the sort that would have generated serious analysis of the nature of the messianic era as well as sustained interest in the questions associated with it, including the calculation of when that era would begin. The distinctions that Cohen drew are not neutralized by Yuval's methodological observations, as important as the latter may be.

The sharp critique in Carlebach's summary remarks is directed against a stereotypical anti-Ashkenazic attitude that she attributes to Cohen. In her view, he adopted a negative image of the Ashkenazic "fundamentalists" in contrast to the rationalistic heroes of Sepharad. This criticism of Cohen evokes a stereotype of its own—the image of the broadly educated historian who respects the Sephardim for their variegated and open culture and disdains the Ashkenazim because they did not study philosophy and were caught up in a narrow, limited belief system.

I believe that this perception is imprecise. Despite Carlebach's assertion that Cohen attributes "a heroic and active profile"⁹ to the warring messianism of the Sephardic world, his article nowhere contains any expression of respect for the putative "military messianism" of the sects in late seventh-century Persia; he does not present the adherents of these movements as heroic in any way. As to his overall assessment of Ashkenaz and Sepharad, there is some basis for Carlebach's evaluation. Cohen sees the Ashkenazim as "fundamentalists" and mentions their belief in anthropomorphism and strange *aggadot*. His statement, which

⁹ Carlebach, p. 2.

Carlebach quotes in her study, that eventually even “some fine Sephardim” internalized Ashkenazic fundamentalism¹⁰ can create the impression that he wanted to set up a dichotomy between the enlightened Sephardim, who deserve respect, and the Ashkenazim, who deserve disdain. And indeed, it is of course true that Cohen himself identified more with the culture of the medieval Sephardim than that of the medieval Ashkenazim. Nevertheless, anyone who studied with Cohen will understand that this formulation was not meant to belittle or mock the Ashkenazim; rather, all that he meant is that distinguished Sephardim absorbed Ashkenazic influence. It is true that even in the sixties the term “fundamentalism” was not a compliment, but even in academic circles, it had not yet attained the full degree of vitriol that it bears today. Cohen did not feel disdain for the simple faith of the Ashkenazim that the Messiah would come whenever God would determine, and certainly not for their avoidance of active messianic movements. When all is said and done, does it really make sense to say that messianic uprisings fit well with “the temper of the historian”? I can testify that Cohen respected the Ashkenazim for their self-sacrifice in times of crisis as a consequence of precisely the constellation of beliefs that he presents in this study, even though he did not identify with those beliefs himself.

Similarly, Carlebach’s assertion that Cohen’s typology has no room for the conservative messianism of the Sephardic rabbinate from the Geonim through Maimonides through R. Jacob Sasportas requires qualification. Cohen does mention this conservatism several times and even emphasizes it. As Carlebach understands very well, his basic argument is that the rabbis related to messianism only on the level of theory, but they did so in such impressive, constant fashion that the masses were inspired to embrace messianic movements, despite the reservations and opposition of the rabbis. As to Ashkenaz, even a generous evaluation of the messianic movements there will reveal a very modest number; it is difficult to agree with the claim that movements of a messianic nature were “frequently” led there by the rabbinic elite.

As I have mentioned, Carlebach points to the discovery of contacts between the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz and Sepharad, and she sees those contacts as a basis for denying the presence of sharp, clear lines distinguishing the two cultures. This argument, for all its plausibility,

¹⁰ Cohen, p. 132 (ed. Kreuzberger).

requires us to confront a broad, complex historical-methodological question with many significant implications: When a civilization, or segment of a civilization, is already beyond its formative stage, and has an established cultural character, under what conditions might we expect that its fundamental characteristics would change due to outside influences? This is not the place to deal with the full dimensions of this question, which have the broadest implications, but generally speaking, it does not appear that cultures undergo deep changes simply on the basis of books and reports brought by travelers or even on the basis of a few personal contacts.

In 1985, the historian Charles Radding published a book which spawned a furious debate. In this book, he argued that the residents of Europe in the first half of the Middle Ages evinced modes of ethical thought that correspond not to those of adults in our society, but to those of children whose age can be identified on the basis of Jean Piaget's system of classification.¹¹ Among other things, Radding maintained that Europeans in that period evaluated the severity of a crime based on its consequences without reference to the perpetrator's intent. One of the criticisms leveled against Radding was that it is impossible to argue that the authors of medieval laws could have ignored the importance of intent since even in the early centuries of the Middle Ages Christian intellectuals read the Bible with the belief that it represented divine revelation, and biblical law views intent as a very important component in ascertaining the severity of a sin and the degree of its punishment. Moreover, as even Radding himself notes, Augustine and other church fathers who were regarded as authorities by medieval lawmakers, also ascribed considerable importance to intent.

However, I think that this argument, which maintains that people who believe in certain books will necessarily internalize their values, does not accord with real psychological processes. Nations that developed characteristic ways of thinking over long periods of time do not undergo fundamental changes over a few generations just because they have adopted a belief in a book that represents a different mentality. It is much easier to adopt a new doctrine than a new way of conceiving reality and the manner in which the universe operates. To the extent

¹¹ Charles Radding, *A World Made by Men: Cognition and Society, 400-1200* (Chapel Hill, 1985).

that Radding has succeeded in pointing to evidence that the *mentalité* of pre-twelfth-century Europeans in fact evinced the ethical conception that he attributes to them (and this remains a debatable proposition), the fact that this conception does not fit the Bible or Augustine does not undermine his conclusion.

With respect to the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz and Sepharad, this point can be illustrated through an examination of an important article on Jewish-Christian polemic.¹² Daniel Lasker demonstrated that philosophical arguments against Christianity originating among Sephardic Jews appeared in books known to Ashkenazim. He pointed to sporadic Ashkenazic use of these arguments beginning in the mid-fourteenth century and to a nugatory number of exceptional philosophical passages before that point. The reader of Lasker's comprehensive book on medieval Jewish philosophical polemic against Christianity will plainly see that Ashkenazic polemical literature plays so negligible a role in it that deletion of the few references to this literature would effect virtually no change at all in its contents.¹³ The article suggests a number of explanations for the absence of philosophical argumentation, but the one that I find most convincing is that the phenomenon is rooted in a difference in worldviews. Lasker's data effectively show us that the estrangement of Ashkenazic Jews from a philosophical mode of thought was so deeply ingrained that they could not digest philosophical concepts even to the extent needed to direct them against Christian disputants – despite the fact that arguments drawing upon them were more effective than those formulated by the Ashkenazim on their own. I do not mean to suggest that the Jews of Ashkenaz, among them sages whose “little finger is thicker than my loins,” were not capable of understanding philosophical discourse. However, even one who understands and even values an argument that is embedded in a cognitive system foreign to the way of thinking in which he has been raised from childhood will not easily mobilize it and transfer it from his peripheral, passive awareness to his central, active consciousness.

In the final analysis, then, the contacts between Ashkenaz and

¹² Daniel J. Lasker, “Jewish Philosophical Polemics in Ashkenaz,” in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, ed. by Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa (Tuebingen, 1996), pp. 195-213.

¹³ Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977).

Sepharad were meaningful, and we should not minimize their significance. But we should also not exaggerate their significance. Deep differences separated the two cultural spheres, certainly to a sufficient degree to sustain Cohen's thesis from an abstract methodological perspective.¹⁴

We have arrived, then, at Carlebach's analysis of the historiographical material. We recall that the key point of her analysis is the affirmation that the Christian environment is what caused Ashkenazic Jews to refrain from recounting messianic episodes, and even when they mentioned them, they downplayed or even ignored the messianic element. Consequently, it is entirely possible that there were many more messianic movements in Ashkenaz than the ones whose memory has been preserved. In other words, the perception of a deep division between a Sepharad overflowing with messianic movements and an Ashkenaz bereft of them rests on the broken reed of flimsy historical documentation.

When I noted earlier that our list of messianic movements is based in part on Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen*, I meant to point out the possibility that a different picture might have emerged had we possessed a fuller, more balanced record. It is clear, then, that we cannot eliminate this uncertainty entirely, and from an abstract, logical perspective, Carlebach's observation indeed sharpens it. Nonetheless, the historiographical data cited in her article do not appear to prove the point.

These data focus on only two movements, those of Laemmelein and Molkho, both in the first half of the sixteenth century. In the first instance, I see no support for the thesis that Ashkenazic writers downplayed the messianic dimension of such movements whereas Sephardic writers presented it fully. Carlebach emphasizes the fact that the Ashkenazi David Ganz characterizes Laemmelein only as a harbinger of the messiah. However, as she reports further, Ganz also informs us of messianic expectations that were associated with Laemmelein's announcement of the redemption, and the Prague Chronicle also speaks in this context of a rumor regarding the Messiah. Among the Sephardim, Ibn Yahya's formulation does not contain any clear messianic content that goes beyond what we find in the Ashkenazic sources. As noted above,

¹⁴ I addressed this subject more fully in "Exegesis, Polemic, Philosophy, and Science: Reflections on the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Modes of Thought," scheduled to appear in the proceedings of a conference on "The Attitude to Science and Philosophy in Ashkenazic Culture through the Ages" to be edited by Gad Freudenthal [now reprinted in this volume].

Yosef ha-Kohen and Sambari report that Laemmelein was considered a prophet sent to be a ruler over the Jewish people, who would “gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth,” but even they have no explicit statement that Laemmelein declared that he was the Messiah. Moreover, the motif of the ingathering of the exiles also appears clearly in David Ganz’s chronicle. (“My grandfather, Seligman Ganz of blessed memory, destroyed an oven dedicated to baking matzah for Passover, for he was absolutely certain that in the following year, he would be baking matzah in the Holy Land.”¹⁵) The general picture here does not reflect a significant difference between Ashkenazic and Sephardic historiography, and Carlebach herself words her conclusions from the data on Laemmelein very cautiously.¹⁶

In the second instance, Carlebach’s analysis points to a somewhat more evident difference, but even this is not convincing. A single Sephardic source (Sambari) says explicitly that Molkho claimed to be the Messiah. Ibn Yahya, who is mentioned in the article without quotation or analysis, writes that Molkho declared that he was one of the *emissaries* of the Messiah,¹⁷ a formulation that Carlebach characterized as avoidance of an explicit messianic identification when she dealt with Ganz’s report that Laemmelein saw himself as the herald of the messiah.

Yosef ha-Kohen’s use of the expression “a shoot came forth out of Portugal” does appear to allude to messianism, but in a manner so brief and indirect that one might plausibly speculate that if the author had been Ashkenazic, Carlebach would have seen such a non-explicit allusion as support for her thesis. Moreover, careful examination generates doubt as to whether or not this formula alludes to messianism at all, for Molkho wrote of himself, “Give your ears to hear the words of a worm, scarcely a man, a shoot from the stem of the men of our exile, who has emerged from our enemies”.¹⁸ Aescoly points out that the word “enemies” here refers to Portugal, a country that persecuted its Jews. It is likely, then, that this passage in the letter by Molkho is the source (whether directly

¹⁵ *Zemah David*, ed. by Mordechai Breuer (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 137, cited by Carlebach, p. 6.

¹⁶ I believe that she is right in her claim that Ashkenazic writers intentionally avoided describing the instances of apostasy that occurred in the wake of the movement, but this point does not necessarily mean that they avoided mentioning messianic movements in and of themselves.

¹⁷ Aharon Ze’ev Aescoly, *Ha-Tenu’ot ha-Meshihiyyot be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 408.

¹⁸ Aescoly, p. 386.

or indirectly) of Yosef ha-Kohen's expression "a shoot came forth out of Portugal," and the context in that letter refers according to its straightforward meaning to humble ancestry, not to Davidic lineage.

If David Ganz really refrained from mentioning the messianic ferment associated with Molkho out of a calculated decision to ignore messianic episodes, why does he mention the messianic stirrings inspired by the accounts concerning Laemmelein? The Prague Chronicle reports messianic expectations that spread as a consequence of Reuveni's activities. Even if Josel of Rosheim intentionally avoided any reference to the messianic aspect of Molkho's activity, we must remember that because he served as a diplomat in royal and princely courts, he could have motivated by special considerations, and it is doubtful that one may extrapolate from his behavior to that of the general population. Yom Tov Lipman Heller's mention of Molkho is only a side-point in a halakhic discussion, so that his failure to identify Molkho as a messianic figure bears no significance. In general, the omission of the fact that Molkho identified himself as the messiah is not meaningful, because it is very likely that this "fact" is not correct. There is no reason to consider Sambari's confused report to be a historically authentic account, and in a matter of this sort we cannot rely on Christian testimonies, whose self-interest with respect to this assertion is blatant.¹⁹ The failure to mention an *erroneous* fact about a messianic declaration can hardly prove an Ashkenazic tendency to avoid reporting candid and complete information about messianic figures. Thus, Carlebach's only meaningful argument from the historiography about Molkho is that Ashkenazic sources fail to mention messianic *ferment*, not that they fail to mention Molkho's supposed self-identification as messiah. Yet even from this point of view, we are speaking about one source that mentions messianic ferment in other contexts (Ganz), a second source that mentions it here (the Prague Chronicle), a third source written by an author with a delicate and atypical position (Josel of Rosheim), and a fourth dealing primarily with an entirely different topic (Heller).

To sum up, Carlebach's methodological point about the historiographical literature is of great interest as a hypothesis, but it

¹⁹ I am not saying that we should reject any Christian report out of hand on the assumption that Christians invented fictional messianic movements out of whole cloth. However, when a Christian provides an account of such a movement, we cannot expect him to distinguish carefully and meticulously among a prophet, a harbinger of the Messiah, an emissary of the Messiah, and the Messiah himself.

has no convincing support from the documentation available to us. What I have written above about the tendency of Jews in Christian lands to recoil from messiahs referred, as I noted, to the embrace of messianic figures, not to the avoidance of reference to messianic movements in Hebrew books. There is a certain logic in the avoidance of such references,²⁰ but we do not have sufficient evidence to conclude that an Ashkenazic historiographic practice has deprived us of information about messianic movements.

Now let us attempt to sum up and propose some cautious suggestions.

It is difficult to accept Cohen's argument that there was a connection between the messianic tendencies of Babylonia and Palestine, on the one hand, and the communities of Sepharad and Ashkenaz hundreds of years later, let alone that this proposed link rested on a common rationalistic component. Similarly, the suggested link between messianic calculations and activism on the one hand and acts of apostasy on the other is baseless and without any convincing logic.

What remains is Cohen's central thesis with its three components.

1. In Sepharad, we find lively messianic discussion of a rationalistic nature, including great interest in calculating the End. In Ashkenaz, on the other hand, the dimensions of messianic discourse are much smaller, and to the degree that it existed, it was entirely different in nature and focused on prophecies and numerical equivalencies.
2. In the Sephardic sector, we find about a dozen messianic figures between 1065 and 1492. In the Ashkenazic sector, we do not find a single one.
3. These differences are rooted in the influence of Sephardic rationalism, which inspired an entire messianic literature. Once this topic was on the agenda, it led to movements despite the opposition of the rabbinic/intellectual elite.

It is clear that Cohen's first assertion is correct to the degree that

²⁰ We recall that Carlebach directs our attention to an interesting and relevant passage in *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. by Wistinetzky (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1884), section 212, pp. 76–77, in which the author warns the reader to be wary of individuals who prophesy about the messiah, for the prediction “will ultimately be revealed to the whole world, and will lead to shame and disgrace.”

it addresses messianic thought, but this point in itself is neither controversial nor innovative. Similarly, messianic calculations are indeed found in the works of important thinkers in Sepharad, whereas the calculations in Ashkenaz tend to occupy a much more peripheral place. Nevertheless, we do find quite a few calculations in Ashkenaz: *Ronnu le-Ya'akov simhah* (the 256th cycle of the calendar), the end of the fifth millennium, and more, though the calculations in Sepharad are more variegated as a result of the broader intellectual vision that we might label “rationalism.”

With respect to messianic movements or figures, Cohen's factual claim retains considerable persuasive power even after all the criticism that has been leveled against it. Even if we use the general term “ferment,” we do not find meaningful messianic activism in the heartland of Ashkenaz except in the generation immediately before the end of the fifth millennium. Yuval has recently argued on the basis of a very interesting text that the migrations of rabbis to the Land of Israel in that generation were inspired after all by messianic motives.²¹ Avraham Grossman has endorsed a messianic explanation, but he emphasizes not the significance of the year 5000 but the influence of the news that the kingdom of the Crusaders had been defeated by Saladin, which, he says, inspired messianic expectation in the communities of Ashkenaz.²² Even if we adopt the messianic understanding of these migrations, the activism in question is simply travel to the Holy Land to pray there. It is difficult to take the Christian report about the year 1337 with all of its anti-

²¹ *Shenei Goyim be-Bitnekh*, pp. 276-283. The sixth chapter of the book is devoted to a comprehensive and fascinating analysis of the influence of messianic expectation in the years before 1240, even though there are grounds for reservations regarding some of the arguments.

²² Grossman, “Nizhonot Salah a-Din ve-ha-Hit'orerut be-Eropah la-'Aliyyah le-Erez Yisrael,” in *Ve-Zot li-Yehudah: Mehqarim be-Toledot Erez Yisrael ve-Yishuvah: Muggashim li-Yehoshua ben Porat*, ed. by Yehoshua Ben-Aryeh and Elchanan Reiner (Jerusalem, 2003), pp. 362-382. Grossman adduces the following in support of his thesis: the travails that Ashkenazic Jewry was suffering at the time; the argument proffered by Christians that their victory in the Crusades was further evidence that the Jews had been rejected in favor of the “True Israel”; liturgical poems describing the desecration of Jerusalem by Christian pollution; a rabbinic statement that the redemption would come at a time of war between the great world-empires; the joy of two Ashkenazic authors (only one of whom refers to Saladin) upon hearing the news of the Muslim victories; a near-messianic description of Saladin in a work by Al-Harizi; and the text which Yuval cites. These arguments establish a reasonable possibility, but it is hard to say that the evidence is genuinely convincing.

Semitic legends too seriously, although there are no decisive grounds for rejecting the possibility that it could be based in fact. Moreover, even one who sees messianic ferment in 1096 in light of *Ronnu le-Ya'akov simhah*, and believes the Christian reports about 1337, and, in the wake of Yuval's study, lays great emphasis on the excitement leading up to 1240, would nonetheless have to admit that before Asher Laemmelein—and even he was not active in the Ashkenazic heartland—we do not have a report of a single messianic figure in Ashkenaz.²³

The burden of proof rests on one who wants to challenge this picture. We may therefore move on to Cohen's third point, where he attempts to explain the phenomenon. Were popular messianic movements actually born out of the influence of elite discussion of messianism, which trickled down to the masses in distorted fashion? This is by no means impossible. The educated elite certainly maintained connections with the masses, and personalities such as Avraham Abulafia even straddled the boundary between messianic thinker and semi-messianic figure.

Nevertheless, it seems that this scenario is relevant only in Spain itself. Figures such as David Al-Ro'i, and others like him, were active in an environment that was not characterized by a rationalist component strong enough to create movements among the masses. In general, it is doubtful that we would be wondering at all about the appearance of about a dozen messianic figures over a period of hundreds of years if not for the contrast with Ashkenaz. We should consequently turn our attention not to the presence of messiahs in the Sephardic communities, but to their absence in Ashkenaz.

In the wake of a reference in Carlebach's article, I have already noted a suggestion made by my student Avraham Pinsker that Ashkenazim may have recoiled from messianic activism because they lived in a Christian environment where they were forced to defend themselves constantly against a religion that believed in a false messiah. This suggestion, however, is subject to challenge. In Christian Spain, after

²³ The messiah of Linon evinces clear "eastern" characteristic, and I believe that Cohen is correct in seeing him as Sephardic rather than French. It should be noted that in a later article, Cohen dismissed all medieval messianic movements as insignificant. While there is much truth in this assertion, the contrast between Ashkenaz and Sepharad in this sphere remains unaffected. See "Messianism in Jewish History: The Myth and the Reality," in Gerson D. Cohen, *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny* (New York and Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 183-212.

all, we continue to find messianic “ferment,” and sometimes even figures of a messianic character. One might respond to this difficulty by arguing that the messianic orientation of Sephardic Jewry was formed under the rule of Islam, and it did not change in the face of the “logical” concerns that might have been expected to uproot it in a Christian environment. Nevertheless, the initial explanation is just a hypothesis, and the fact that we need to defend it immediately against a reasonable challenge shows that we should probably not embrace it with conviction.

Let me move then to a different suggestion, which was also first proposed in a discussion with students. Sheila Rabin, who studied with me many years ago, suggested that the small populations of the Ashkenazic communities served as an impediment to messianic movements. She did not elaborate, but I believe that the suggestion deserves serious consideration.

The number of people who follow a messianic figure at the beginning of his career – and in most cases, even at the height of his career – are normally only a small percentage of the community’s population. If the community is very small, one could hardly expect the number of believers to reach the level necessary to transform the presumed messiah from a mere curiosity to an influential personality. Furthermore, people who have intimately known the messianic figure since his childhood are not usually those who are mostly likely to be convinced by his messianic claims. From this perspective, the communities in the Sephardic sector, which were usually larger than those in Ashkenaz, were more likely to generate messianic movements.

Finally – another suggestion that is also related to the nature of small communities, but focuses primarily on the relationship between the rabbinic elite and the masses. Let us remember that Carlebach has noted the sense of identification that the members of the small Ashkenazic communities felt with the rabbinic scholars in their midst to support her claim that messianic activity by rabbis influenced the community as a whole. I have already expressed my view that messianic activity among the rabbis of Ashkenaz was in reality extremely limited. For this very reason, Carlebach’s observation about the relationship between the Ashkenazic rabbis and the masses provides an opening for a new understanding of the absence of messianic movements or figures in Ashkenaz. In general, as Cohen has emphasized, rabbis did not follow messiahs. The small messianic movements in the Middle Ages arose and

grew in the popular stratum of society, whereas the rabbinic elite reacted to them with suspicion, even with hostility. Consequently, we should not expect messianic movements to develop in small communities in which the “masses” are very closely linked to the rabbis. Of course, this picture of the authority held by the rabbis of Ashkenaz is exaggerated and generalized, but I believe that there is enough truth in it to support the basic argument.

We have examined a truly gripping historical and historiographical issue. After the criticisms presented both in this article and in Carlebach’s lecture, Cohen’s famous thesis is reduced to the point where it stands on two factual claims: (1) In medieval Spain and the Middle East, we find messianic figures; but in Ashkenaz, we find none. (2) Speculative messianic thought, including variegated calculations of the End, is characteristic specifically of Sephardic communities. It is not impossible that Cohen was correct in his attempt to associate the presence or absence of messianic figures with varying approaches to faith and thought; however, the suggested connection is not straightforward, since he must assume that rationalism created movements only indirectly. Moreover, not all the messianic claimants appeared in rationalistic environments. It is consequently preferable to turn to other considerations. In Spain and the Middle East, messianic figures occasionally appeared, sometimes as a result of influences that we can identify, or at least surmise, such as the Shiite environment or the turmoil in Yemen; but even when we do not have a good explanation for a particular movement, there is no basis for perplexity regarding the rise of a few small movements over the course of many generations. The real question is why there were no messianic figures in Ashkenaz, and here we may perhaps proffer the modest suggestions that I have proposed. Even when small communities grow to some extent over the course of time, patterns of messianic thought and expectation formed over the course of generations do not change easily, especially in light of the continuing authority and influence of the rabbinic leadership, which was very wary of embracing messianic figures. In sum, it may well be that the communal profile that characterized Ashkenazic Jewry also determined its messianic profile.