

**RABBI DR. JAY MICHAELSON:
JEWISH MYSTICISM UPSIDE DOWN & INSIDE OUT**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, A partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council. Featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and a conversation with Rabbi Dr. Jay Michaelson. Jay Michaelson is an affiliated assistant professor at Chicago Theological Seminary and a fellow at our neighbor, the American Jewish University. He holds a PhD in Jewish thought from the Hebrew University and a JD from Yale Law School, as well as non-denominational Rabbinic ordination. His most recent book, "The Heresy of Jacob Frank: From Jewish Messianism To Esoteric Myth", was published by Oxford University Press and won the 2022 National Jewish Book Award for scholarship. Rabbi Jay Michaelson thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast, and congratulations on the National Jewish Book Award.

Dr. Jay Michaelson: Thank you so much. Really a pleasure to be here.

JH: I'd like to begin our conversation with an introduction, if you would, on Jacob Frank and what he means for some of these basic Jewish ideas such as Jewish Messiness.

DM: Sure. So right now, the name, Jacob Frank, maybe is unknown, but at the height of his infamy in 1759, he was really perhaps the most notorious Jewish heretic in Europe. He was part of a movement that essentially broke away from Rabbinic Judaism, and he led the largest mass apostasy, the mass conversion to Christianity in Jewish history, probably between 3,000 and 5,000 people, although some estimates go even higher.

JH: Voluntary apostasy as opposed to forced.

[laughter]

DM: That's right, that's right. Yes. And Jacob Frank was operating not in a vacuum, but in a long history of semi tolerated, Jewish heresy in various parts of, central and eastern Europe primarily. He followed in the footsteps of Sabbatai Zevi who in at the height of his powers a century earlier, attracted between a quarter and a third of European Jews to believe that the Messiah was here incarnate as Sabbatai Zevi and that redemption was at hand. This caused kind of a mass movement, certainly within European jury until in 1666, the Ottoman Sultan gave Sabbatai Zevi the choice to convert or die, and he converted. The mass movement of Sabbateanism disappeared. The Messiah converted to Islam. He was clearly no longer the Messiah. However, perhaps surprisingly, a small number of Sabbatai Zevi's adherence continued to believe that he was the Messiah.

DM: Some actually outwardly converted to Islam following, Sabbatai Zevi's lead, but secretly practiced a kind of heretical mystical Judaism and others, while they did not convert, they remained in the Jewish community, still harbored beliefs that the Messianic age was at hand, and we should remember, obviously there's a social and an economic context to this movement. There's also a kind of ideological context where some of the ideas of Kabbalah of Jewish mysticism and Esotericism had begun to percolate through to larger audiences. This movement, however, of Sabbateanism was relatively small for about a hundred years, and various Rabbis tried to stamp it out. Others said, let's just ignore it and it'll go away on its own. And that debate continued really for that a hundred year period until, Jacob Frank's sect appeared in the 1750s. There's some controversy about how they were discovered, allegedly involved in a kind of scandalous ritual, but it led to a two-year period of disputations between the Rabbinic leadership and the Catholic Church, which was mediating between the Jewish leadership and the Frankist sect.

DM: This ended after a, a remarkable series of twists and turns of this movement, at least Frankism is a later term. They never used that term. They called themselves "Maaminim" believers. The sect was deemed a heresy, and they were given the choice to convert or die the entire sect, and most converted at that time. The story didn't end, however, at that time, because the conversion was insincere and Frank's sect continued to believe that he was not quite the Messiah in the way that we normally think of what the Messiah is supposed to do, but kind of some sort of, precursor to the Messiah, or certainly at least a political leader. Initially, the Frankist goal was to gain an autonomous province within Europe, so it wasn't return to the land of Israel, rebuild the temple and so forth. It was just having an autonomous land of their own, as part of Poland, which is where they were.

DM: This was discovered in 1759 by the Polish authorities, and Frank was thrown in jail for 12 years, and he was released not because anyone cared about him anymore, but because there was kind of what periodic conflict between, Poland and Russia and other neighboring powers, and he was just released at one current during the war. What was interesting to me as a scholar was that Frank created a remarkably original theology. Frank was not a good guy. He was really a kind of, almost an 18th century cult leader. If we were to be anachronistic, he was abusive toward his followers. This is not somebody who I would hold up as a paragon of ethical virtue by any means. That being said, as a scholar, I found him quite fascinating. I went to Hebrew University many years ago to write my PhD on Hasidism, and I found a certain frustration that

no matter how innovative the theology, at the end of the day, it was going to underscore a very traditional program, and you sort of knew what the answer was at the beginning of the questions.

DM: With Frank, you never know what the answer's gonna be. Every time I turn the page of his recorded oral teachings, I find something surprising, and I literally wrote the book on it. There is just something remarkably creative, and in a certain way, prescient. Frank iterated some of the critiques of Jewish traditional religious law and observance that would be very familiar, certainly from a reform movement point of view, that this law is not divinely ordained, that it sometimes is irrational and not in a good way, in the way that, you know, this doesn't make sense. The promises of reward and punishment are not kept and that it's time to let go. He would say of some of the ritual laws to move to a place of more freedom. Again, this may sound like early 19th century reform, but it wasn't from a rational point of view.

DM: It wasn't from a philosophical or Jewish enlightenment in the sense of European enlightenment point of view, but from a mystical one. Frank combined this kind of critique of law. That's the antinomianism in part, the belief that transgressing the law is actually a positive religious value with a radical, strange, weird fantasy made up of Kabbalah, of Western esoterism. And his goal was something a little bit like the alchemical goal of pursuit of eternal life. All of this I found incredibly absorbing as a scholar, mostly because as I mentioned, a lot of times Frank was seen as just opportunistic, just a cult leader without a theology of his own. And I discovered that that wasn't the case, and that's what the book is really about.

JH: You argue that the Frankists or Jacob Frank himself would somehow seed that is to say S-E-E-D, the Jewish Enlightenment, even if indirectly in Prague. And in this argument you echo Gershom Scholem, according to Scholem, Sabbatai Zevi, another sort of mythologized heretic helped to spur the Jewish enlightenment again, indirectly. Do you see Scholem's point, and if so, think out loud with me for a minute about what's going on here with Jewish heresy and Jewish enlightenment?

DM: So I think the scholarly consensus, which I share is that Gershom Scholem was about 90% incorrect. Scholem had a kind of meta theory of Jewish history that Jewish history could really be explained almost entirely from within Jewish history itself. This seems certainly not to be the case. Overwhelming number of scholars have written that and pretty much proven, I think that the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment mostly came in because of increased Jewish contact with Christians in Europe. They became aware of the philosophical and, political writings of the Enlightenment. There were various changes and liberalizations in terms of the treatment of Jews and a segment of the Jewish population, a kind of elite, well-educated segment, began to affiliate with the enlightenment ideals, including rationalism, also including historical critique of some dogmas of religion, some loosening of some of the power structures of religion. It seems, I think at this point, incontrovertible that the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment derived primarily and from contacts between Jews and, the European Enlightenment. Where Scholem was correct, was it was true that the Sabbatean heresy greatly loosened the power of the Rabbinic elites.

DM: Many of the Rabbinic elites were in fact, Sabbatean, right? The, Rabbinite in Europe was really torn apart, during this 100 to 150 year period, and that went through the Frankist movement itself. It was also true that the doctrines of Sabbateanism and Frankism lent themselves to a reformist, not reform with a capital R, but lowercase r reformist impulse within Judaism, that if some of these myths and observances are not promoting human well-being, let's say that's really a 21st century concept. But if we throw it back, then maybe we should set those down, right? That's something where these mystical movements, and let's call it rationalist reform, might find an overlap. So in Frank's case, this is not the great meta theory that Scholem proposed, but there is an intersection. There were two main Frankist communities after let's say 1759. So 1759, the disputations take place, there's a conversion.

DM: Most of the communities move either to Warsaw or to Prague. Most of the Warsaw Frankist were converts. They were called neophytes by the Poles, and they actually excelled within the Polish professional class. The Prague Frankist, on the other hand, mostly remained Jewish, but were heavily influenced first by Sabbateanism and mystical speculation, and then also by Jacob Frank, and then also by the European Enlightenment. So there is an overlap. Some of the same families who became the leaders of the Haskalah in Prague also were Frankist families. And there's even a fascinating text that one of my teachers, Etta Rapport-Alpert unearthed, which is a sort of quasi proto-feminist from a member of that community, explaining that the liberation of women was part of the Messianic age. That was a Sabbatean concept, and also before that a Kabbalistic concept, but that that should also include political liberation.

DM: So around the same time as the vindications of the Rights of Women came this bizarre kind of mystical/philosophical treatment of the same subject. And one of the descendants of these families in Prague, was Justice Brandeis, obviously from the Supreme Court in the United States, and one of his descendants is a friend of mine, and it is true, there was these sets of family traditions that go back to the late 18th century, and the Frankist community. So there is a very curious overlap. There's an overlap historically in the case of Prague, and there's an overlap conceptually, as I mentioned before, but there's not the kind of larger causal relationship, that Gershom Scholem postulated.

JH: You introduce the rather, I guess, extravagant complexity of people like Frank, and more interestingly, I think as you just pointed out, you investigate the undercurrents of deeper social and intellectual critiques that go hand in hand with that kind of cult leader quality, that kind of toxic narcissism. In this vein, you cite Casanova and the Marquis de Sade appreciating the profound differences between these characters. What are the similarities between the likes of Frank and Sade, as well as the similarities in the fascination that they subsequently and still inspire?

DM: I wish there was the level of fascination about Jacob Frank, that there is about, let's say, Casanova or de Sade, but now that that is actually starting to appear post released from prison in 1772, Frank lived until 1791, and he operated in what can often seem like a fictional world, but it was not fictional. It was actually the real world in which he operated of the kind of network of charlatans and pretenders. And Frank once passed himself off as Russian nobility. And after he died, his daughter, Eva, who led the sect, claimed that she was in some way connected to

the Romanovs, which is ridiculous. That's not true in the slightest, kind of the scientific revolution was percolating through, into mass consciousness in a way that it had not before this period, at the end of the 18th century. Simultaneously, there's an interest in hidden wisdom.

DM: So I'll give you one example of this. There's an antisemitic conspiracy theory to this day on the internet, and one of those theories, right, is that Jews and the Rothschilds helped finance, the French Revolution. This was brought, brought on by Jewry. That's clearly not true in any significant sense, but it is the case that, Frank's leading disciple, Moses de Prushka kind of was a gun runner between the Habsburg Empire and the French revolutionaries. And there were these contacts through the Freemasons and through other secret societies that really did happen, blown way out of proportion by all the conspiracy theories. But those were actual, networks in Europe, and the Frankist sect played a very small role in that network. So that's one example that, again, it may seem like I should be thrown in the conspiracy theories file [laughter] but I assure you, at least it's not just me. There's a lot of good scholarship, on this particular subject as well. And you know, these were figures who found a kind of social mobility that had not been available prior to this time. This was the social as well as intellectual milieu, of which Frank was a part.

JH: The eminent 20th century Talmudist, Saul Lieberman famously said, of Jewish mysticism, "all of Kabbalah is complete nonsense," but the academic study of nonsense, that is scholarship. You triggered my memory of this really quite famous quote, at least in Jewish study circles, when you described Frank's teachings as fascinating, complex, and often convoluted. Is it intellectually fair-minded of us to attribute a certain degree of arbitrariness and perhaps even downright nonsense to the internal logic of Jewish mysticism in which symbols and meanings often shift kaleidoscopically and recombine in such ways as to at least sometimes appear that they can mean anything you want them to mean whenever you want them?

DM: I think the first thing I wanna say is that, that Lieberman quote, which is famous or infamous, depending on how much of a rationalist one is would apply much more, I would think to Frank actually, than to Kabbalah itself. There is a degree of nonsense, and, we barely scratched the surface. There's a ton of magic in his, oral teachings. He had a belief that our world is just a tiny part of the real universe, and there was a kind of a screen or a curtain between us and the other world. And in the other world, people lived forever. And so the goal of the Frankist quest was to unite with this other parallel sect. I love narrative and myths and the non-rational, so I hesitate to use the word nonsense, but if I were to use it, it would apply here.

[chuckle]

DM: So, I think that's fair. You know, I think there's a degree of conceptual and mythological complexity and theosophical complexity to Kabbalah in general, such that the Lieberman quote strikes me as intellectually unfair, and inaccurate. There's a Hasidic story that could be a kind of parallel, I think this is attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, which is that in the age of Lurianic Kabbalah, this very abstruse, complicated, ornate system, of symbols and correspondences and so forth. They knew the keys to every lock to heaven. The Baal Shem Tov allegedly then said, "we don't have the keys, so we have to break down the locks with the force of our enthusiasm

and our ecstasy." Frank was, then the Baal Shem Tov contemporaries, and the Baal Shem Tov was aware of the Frankist apostasy and aware that it was forced on the sect, really by the rabbis, who reported them to the authorities.

DM: Again, side note, you know, reporting fellow Jews to Christian authorities is clearly against every conception of Halakhah, certainly in the 18th century, and let alone where the penalty for heresy was death. So the rabbis knew exactly what they were doing, and they wanted to remove the sect. Yaakov Emden, who was the Frank's leading opponent, said that sometimes, a limb has become diseased and you have to cut it off for the good of the rest of the body. Baal Shem Tov countered that, when the Shekhinah has a limb that's diseased, it can always be healed, but once it's cut off, there's no saving it. That statement from the Baal Shem Tov of I think, points to the conceptual seriousness of theosophical Kabbalah that makes it for me, something that isn't nonsense. When I was 21 or 22 and first learning Jewish mysticism in an undergraduate seminar at Columbia, I used Abraham Abulafia a 13th century Kabbalist to taught letter combinations, and I used letter combinations to prove all sorts of things. And Christian Kabbalist did that for real in the, I think 16th, 17th, 18th centuries using Abolafian techniques to prove that Jesus was the Messiah and prove other, doctrines of faith. There is that kind of anarchic possibility, to some of these Kabbalistic doctrines, but I think Frank is much more nonsense than Kabbalah is.

JH: Rabbi Larry Kushner loves to tell a story when he frames this intellectual problems. He, says he was once driving on the freeway and he was behind a car that had a bumper sticker that said, "24 hours in a day, 24 beers in a case. Coincidence?"

[laughter]

DM: There are coincidences. That's the, but that is, it is true. You know, look in my, in some of my non scholarly work in the political realm, there's a whole movement now of what's called, conspirituality, which are people who are the one hand amongst sort of the new age, which people I think associate with sort of left wing, being very liberal, but who are adopting right-wing conspiracy theories like QAnon and so forth. And, the malleability of any intuition based spiritual consciousness and anything where there is this level of free symbolism is very real. Personally, I find it deeply disturbing in the contemporary context for what it's worth, Frank had contempt for the complexities of Kabbalistic symbolism. He would make fun of it sometimes he said, oh, if the Spheroid are 10 houses, which they're sometimes called, I wonder where the outhouses are. He had a very, kind of vulgar sense of humor, and he just thought that all of this Kabbalistic speculation was, was actually more nonsense. And the goal was to liberate oneself in this world, in the here and now, and that God does exist, but that God wants us to be free and to be fully actualized human beings not held back by a bunch of spiritual nonsense. So in a weird way, he and Saul Leiberman might agree, although I think it's maybe crazy to say that.

JH: I would push back on your description of the vulnerability of these highly affective structures such as Kabbalah, the malleability does not derive from the fact that they're profoundly affective, I think the malleability that makes it vulnerable derives from the attempt to systematize these things if one were to leave them in the realm of the affective and to describe them thus, I don't

think they would be subject to the kind of Liberman critique. It's the move to systematize them, to present them as such, that seems to crack it open for critique from that angle.

DM: That's interesting. I see that, and I think it goes back to that kind of polarity of The Baal Shem Tov story, right, if you have the enthusiasm to break into, let's call it a spiritual state of some kind, that's all well and good, because it's labeled as that. It's labeled as a kind of enthusiasm, or a spiritual [Hebrew] or something. But it's when you think that there actually are 75 keys to the locks, I still I'm not on board because of the distinctive mode of spirituality that Kabbalah sometimes engenders, I'm thinking here of Melila Hellner-Eshed's work on the Zohar. And it is a very distinctive style of intellectual spiritual consciousness that she shows brilliantly, I think, and her work is present in the Zoharic mysticism, of the Zoharic literature, and I think they're not the same, and I think that that kind of consciousness in part derives from the systemitization, when I sometimes teach Kabbalah in synagogues, let's say, I'll sometimes refer to like Zoharic Kabbalah, a little bit like a group jazz improvisation, where the basic melody is known, but one figure will go off in this way, and now you can go off in this other way of bringing your experiences to bear, but that requires that kind of deeply fluent, shared spiritual language.

DM: So if I say that this is [Hebrew] and you don't know what I'm talking about, we can't do the jam, right, and you have to know that I've just quoted from Someone To Watch Over Me so that then you can quote back something else. It's a kind of consciousness that if it were reducible just to affect as The Baal Shem Tov seems to suggest, or as some, let's say Neo-Hasidism sometimes suggests, sure, but it's something more tricky than that, more complicated.

JH: And I accept your point that a lot of that which appears to be nonsensical is in fact simply the fact that you are not inducted into it sufficiently to understand where the connections are being legitimately and consistently made. So I take that point.

DM: And I would also take a piece of your point that what Lieberman was aware of was also conditioned by a lot of 19th century nonsense, which itself was conditioned by Western esotericism, so there's another through line here where Frankism was part of this movement of Western esotericism, which influenced the theosophists or Eliphas Levi or the other figures who kind of popularized Kabbalah as a system of universal science that became really quite widespread in the 19th century.

[music]

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JH: I'd like to shift gears a little bit and move to the political and in so doing, I'd like to introduce you to our audience as a public personality and thinker, specifically as a media pundit on legal matters, I saw an interview of yours on white flag with Joe Walsh, which you posted on your

website, in it, you took a very nuanced view of a controversial gay rights case that hinged on the competing principles of public accommodation and freedom of religion was a case that echoed the more famous case of the Colorado baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple. In this interview, you cited your professional identity as a rabbi, apparently, and I say apparently advisedly, 'cause I wanna give you the opportunity to tell me I'm wrong, but apparently you did so as an opportunity to identify and gain credibility with the side with which you ultimately disagree, that is to say you are a gay rights activist, but you invoke your religious credibility as a bridge to the other side of that debate.

JH: And before we go any further, I hasten to point out that the depth and complexity of your arguments really did convey to me, that you are indeed very sensitive to those cross-currents and take them very seriously. Is it in fact the reason why you cite being a rabbi in the context of such conversations, and if so, does doing so actually achieve this goal in the eyes of adversarial interlocutors? Do you actually get credibility by virtue of being a rabbi.

DM: So for me, I see a lot of my activist work as a kind of public theology. Many years ago, I wrote a book called *God Vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*, which bemoaned the common media construction of the two sides. One side was religious, and traditional and anti-LGBTQ and the other side were kind of secular constitutional rights, we should have equal rights and separation of church and state, we also should have separation of church and state and equal rights, but my point in that book many years ago was to say that these are also ethical, moral, religious debates that for one side, at least, to just make a legal argument, it's less a tactical matter like, Oh well, the opponents of my humanity listen to me now because I say I'm a rabbi, and more of just an attempt to reframe the entire conversation, and parenthetically, I think we are in a very similar place around transgender equity today, where there's one side that is grounded in religious objections and traditional moralist objections, and I think once again, the kind of religious progressive side isn't getting the kind of attention that let's say more secular-minded activists in the LGBTQ space get.

DM: And it's not that that's bad, I think there's space for both, but that's a gap. That's a gap. And so it's a gap that in that conversation, I'm interested in filling because I think there are profound ethical values on what I would say is the progressive side of some of these contentious contemporary issues. And so for me, for a while also, I've been on CNN and they love pointing out that I'm a rabbi, and then they raise their eyebrows wondering what I'm doing on the set of CNN not being a political pundit, but for me, that's the best of public theology. I'm just hastened to say I'm in no way comparing myself to, let's say Abraham Joshua Heschel or other figures like that, but I see them as heroes and contemporary figures like Jill Jacobs, for example, people who are praying with our feet, and more than that... And again, it's not just about like, maybe I can be more persuasive if I wear a Kippa at the protest, but it's more about maybe I can re-define what this protest is even about in the first place.

JH: I think one of the differences between, for the sake of argument, traditionally cast Christian clergy versus the Rabbinate that is to say Jewish clergy is that baked into the Rabbinate from time immemorial is a civic Rabbinate in addition to a spiritual Rabbinate, which is to say it's dyed in the wool of the Rabbinate itself, that there is a judicial component, there is a civic component,

there is a distribution of wealth component, there's all these other aspects of the polity, which in Judaism are not to be artificially disentangled from the spiritual. And I hear you in describing yourself to have chosen a path that embodies that unified integrated, Rabbinate. It also has a lot to do with what Frank represents, especially in some of the themes that you yourself described, and I wanna give you the opportunity to talk about the power structure that is the Rabbinate and Frank's disruption of it.

DM: First of all, thank you, for describing my work as in any way integrated, it's definitely something I struggle with with my therapist all the time to achieve that characterization and drawing any connection between Frank in the present day where I have gotten in trouble is noting that Frank's followers and himself did pre-figure a certain questioning around conservative, small c, conservative religious lines around sexuality and even gender, the Sabbatean movement had the most prominent leadership of women, not only spiritual leadership, but also temporal leadership, in any movement for another 200-250 years in Judaism. They had a symbolic structure for that, but also a kind of what we might call a political or a messianic liberatory structure for that shared power, and a lot of that structure was created by women. That's remarkable. And yet, it also pre-figured or anticipated some aspects of small r, but also big R Reform Judaism that would become central. The idea that there could be a Jewish religious consciousness that was not tied to halachic observance of the ritual law. That's quite radical at the, in the 18th century and even, and in the late 17th century when Sabbatai Zevi was active, so that's where it's remarkable.

DM: And the power structure question, it's hard to know what Frank's motivations were in critiquing Rabbinic power. Clearly, he just wanted more power himself. Some of it was similar to the ways in which the early Hasidim critique to Rabbinic power, which was to say there was a kind of set of, here's what it means to get into the country club. In terms of a certain kind of learning leadership class background and so forth, and having charismatic leaders in Hasidism, we didn't go to the Harvard and Yale, the great Rabbinic academies was a threat to that structure and was seen as oppositional to that structure. I think for Frank and for the Baal Shem Tov, it was more of a profound disagreement as to what Judaism should even be, that should even be about whether it's about pious observances or spiritual enthusiasm or gaining Temporal Power.

DM: Those are three very different goals and they have very different consequences for what the right Jewish life or the right righteous Jewish life should look like. Because I've gotten in trouble around this, I hesitate to draw any power lines between the Frankist episode in our own day, only to note that these power structures are there, and it is, I think, incumbent on clergy in today's day and age to take some unpopular stances, perhaps not in their own congregations, where those could be divisive, but where there are matters of profound moral debate in our society, the very least being a non-congregational rabbi, maybe it's just a privilege that I have that I don't have to be responsible to a community with different demands, and I can really totally respect that, I'm friends with numerous rabbis who wish they could speak out on X or Y issue, but they know that it would cause harm to their communities, and so they don't do it, and that's I'm sure the right choice. I'm fortunate in that I don't have that constrained around me.

JH: Jacob Frank and Sabbatai Zevi are often spoken of in the same breath, under the category of false Messiah, and as you described Jacob Frank is a figure who leveraged and abused the spiritual impulse to lead people to extremes, and while that risk always reside in the religious endeavor, writ large it most certainly resides in the messianic subset of the religious endeavor in particular. In that Messianic context, does Judaism at least potentially bring something particular to the Jewish civilization that might moderate rather than polarize the messianic idea.

DM: Yeah, I love that question. Even before my study of Frank, I was fascinated by what I might call weird religion, which often include messianic cults and New Religious Movements. I was fascinated to learn that the Jehovah's Witnesses thought that the world was gonna end in 1974, and then when it didn't, went back and audited the theology...

JH: Yeah, recalculated...

DM: Right. Exactly. I was fascinated to see 2012 come and go in the new age world. And even today, there's something around 70% of self-identified US evangelicals who say that they believe that rapture will come in their lifetime, they may be saying that just as a matter of religious creed, they might not really believe it, but at least that's the number. And I think that clearly influences politics in a radical way, it influences Christian Zionism, it influences the way that this very, very large, well, dwarfing the Jewish population spends money in the Middle East and who they spend money on, and you can trace some of Israel's current political crisis, as we're speaking now to those massive amounts of funding that come from an eschatological or a messianic impulse, the idea that this is the final battle in some form or another, I don't know the answer to your question as to whether there's something in Jewish consciousness that can successfully mitigate or mediate that.

DM: It is true that we don't have as many Messiah complexes, but you don't have to look too far to see Habad, for example, it's been a really interesting, I think, where a large percentage, possibly a majority of [hebrew] Hassadism believed that the rabbi was the Messiah, they've actually adapted pretty well to his appearance.

JH: Yeah.

DM: Yeah. Right. It's remarkable the theological apparatuses that have been deployed have basically worked. And at the time, there was a lot of wondering is that whether the sect would survive? Would it become a kind of fringe movement, and there is a percentage of Habad that is that, that is a kind of strange messianic french movement, but the majority has shown itself to be remarkably resilient, so it's possible maybe it is the traditional Jewish emphasis on the worldly. There's still the mitzvahs to do and the prayers to Davin. Right, I may not agree with it politically, but Chabad is also very politically engaged.

DM: They're just on the opposite side of the issues from where I usually are, but they are living the same values that we were talking about a few minutes ago about engagement with a civic Judaism that's not purely either a mystical, are purely religious, and they're very effective, again, I'm on the other side, but I can't criticize the engagement that they've been very successful in.

So that too grounds us in the worldly and perhaps is some kind of a backstop against the messianic in particular. At the same time, many, American Jews are looking over towards what's happening in Israel with some degree of concern, and there is a messianic element to a lot of the very far right political right in Israel, messianic may be too narrow, and I argue in the book that Jacob Frank never puts himself out as a traditional Messiah. 'Cause he doesn't say he's gonna do the things that Jewish Messiah's do, but he does put himself out as a kind of profit and a leader who will usher in some new phase of humanity, maybe it'll be his sectarian learning the key to immortality and gaining Temporal Power, and it might be helpful to use the term millennial-ism, not millennial as in 2000.

DM: But in millennial and the Christian sense of the 1000-year period of Christ reign on earth. Millennial-ism referring to any dramatic shift in the way things are, that's imminent, that's about to be brought on, so in that mode a UFO cult could be seen as millennial. So could certain forms of Marxism. Any time there's a sort of radical redemptive movement, and in that frame, certainly what's happening on the far right in Israel is millennialist even if it's not messianic, and I say all that that whole discourse to inject a little skepticism about whether Judaism is that different from other traditions in its ability to moderate that Messianic impulse.

DM: And last thing I would say too, is that if we look historically at a lot of what's now considered Jewish spirituality, it's sublimated messianism. Hasidism came out of Sabbateanism that's understood and as a kind of domesticated Sabbateanism that domesticates the messianic moment into personal spiritual practice or communal spiritual practice that says that you can experience the world to come by having a mystical experience in your own prayer lay, Gersham Scholem called is the neutralization of messianism, but I think Moshe Idel leading Kabbalah scholar, said This isn't really neutralization of messianism, it's just a displacement of that Messianic impulse to a non-historical domain. So even what we understood, literally when there's a nice Friday night service and somebody singing a Hasidic or a Neo-Hasidic melody that has an intellectual lineage that dates back to the Sabbatean heresy.

JH: So maybe the sublimation is a partial answer to the question.

DM: It did work, there's a reason Hasadism succeeded where Frankism failed and partly that Hasadism survived its persecutions and remained part of the Jewish enterprise, but I think part of it was the successful genius of the early Hasidic masters to domesticate or sublimate the non-domesticatable, they somehow did it. This kind of almost anarchic, spiritual, mystical impulse that successfully got integrated with an Anomean framework and a civilizational Jewish framework that Frank said, You can't have it both ways. You can't do... Laws have to be cast aside, obviously the Baal Shem Tov did not say anything like that, and said that it is possible to have the inner Torah inhabit the world that is still governed by the external one.

JH: I would argue that one of the answers to my question has to do with the civilizational dimensionality of Judaism, whereby the term religion in the first place is a misnomer or at least an incomplete term, and as a result, even the most piously mysticalized version of Judaism never shakes the communal historical consciousness of disappointment and pain and suffering, and part of the story of disappointment, pain and suffering is the self-imposed pain of false

messianism, and that consciousness, David Alroy, Jacob Frank, Sabbatai Zevi these stories resonate with us and they are morality tipped. And I think we have embedded them in our consciousness such that... Well, they have to surface periodically in a way, they surface merely as abject lessons, not as genuine re-orientations of our civilization, but they're like corrections, they're market corrections in the market place of ideas.

DM: Yeah, that's really provocative. So recently, I was just at the Parliament Of World Religions, which is a sort of gathering of interfaith types, it's a very lefty, progressive conference. Takes place every few years, and one often finds a certain kind of perennial-ism there or universalism. And it's often Jews who are pushing back against it. So there's this notion of like, Well, all religions share a common core of mystical searching for oneness with the divine or something like that, and then the Jews get up and say, Well, there is a real truth to that that. I've written about Jewish enlightenment in my non-academic work and my spiritual writing that the models of awakening in a Jewish spiritual context inevitably involve some kind of recto verso, of running and returning between this world and some kind of expanded consciousness. There's never a notion that cliché of the old man on top of the mountain with the long white beard, that's never been the Jewish paragon of spiritual awakening. Our old man went up on the mountain and then came back with the Ten Commandments and with the whole legalistic Torah.

DM: And there is an aspect I think that feels to me profoundly true that I remember back to Chabad messianism when the rabbi was still alive, I was having home hospitality with a Chabad family, and they had the tradition to not paint a part of the apartment where they were living right, because the [Hebrew] was gonna come anyway, so why bother finish painting the apartment 'cause the [Hebrew] could come right, right now.

DM: And they even did that thing, which is like I want it to happen right now, and it felt to me at odds with where I think maybe were gesturing in your remark that we don't want this world to be annihilated and we don't want to be raptured. If we're raptured, how do we do Mitzvahs, how do we do justice work, how do we do community work? What about our histories? And there is a sort of Valerization of the worldly that in here, actually Frank would actually agree, he was very much about the material and the physical and the worldly as opposed to the spiritual, but there is within normative Judaism, I think a sacralization of the every day this world is not only illusion and is not only nothing but God, but also has its reality, where the work of justice, family, righteousness, courts and love take place.

JH: I'd like to close out with an opportunity for you to share with us an aspect of Frank story that has stuck with you that niggles at the back of your brain, even now, after you're done with the book, something that just you can't shake and maybe something you wouldn't have predicted to do so in the course of writing this book.

DM: I love that question, I haven't been asked that before. So after the disputation of 1759, Frank had an opportunity to achieve what looked like his real dream, which was to assimilate into Christian society with power and he didn't. And we don't have a historical record for why that happened, he was reported by one of his followers to the secular authorities that his conversion was insincere and that Frank was still himself being venerated as some sort of a

holy figure. And he was imprisoned, and at that moment, it's not clear that he would have attained his goal of having territorial autonomy and part of Poland, but he could have, because when converted Jews converted to Christianity in Poland, they received a kind of low nobility status, which came with all kinds of privileges because it was an incentive to convert. And they attained that status, and yet for some reason, that isn't what happened. There were other sectarian leaders, [Hebrew] was another figure who led the sect after the sect was first arrested, 1757. He disappears from history. We assume he converted and that's it. He changed his name and nobody knows what happened.

DM: And then when Frank is imprisoned, he's imprisoned, coincidentally question mark at Czestochowa, which is the National Shrine of Poland, and it's a shrine around a portrait of the Virgin Mary painted on wood that ostensibly, I think the legendary attribution is painted by John the Baptist. So I went to Czestochowa when I was in Poland learning Polish and doing some research for the dissertation, which became the book, and it's an amazing pilgrimage site. Now, people come from all over the place in Poland and also the Polish diaspora to venerate, not the Virgin Mary, but the actual physical portrait. It's the portrait that is believed to have healing powers and it's been overlaid with gold, and it does have these very piercing eyes, it's quite remarkable.

DM: You can just Google the Black Virgin of Czestochowa and the devotion around the portrait, I have of course no idea what it was like in the 1760s, but it is incredibly powerful. And so Frank had a whole theology that the Messiah was going to be a woman and who was going to be an incarnation of perennial female figure who occurs over and over again in Jewish history and possibly incarnated in Frank daughter Eve. A number of sort of figures from Jewish history are actually this kind of trans-migrating Messiah, the female Messiah, who represents also spiritual liberation, sexual liberation and the material, and he developed that under this influence, and it's just remarkable that turn. On the one hand, he had this opportunity to assimilate into secular Polish society somehow that didn't happen.

DM: And he ended up at a place where for hundreds of years, there has been this remarkable devotion to a physical object that also depicts a woman, the mother of God, and we'll never know what Frank really believed. And again, as a scholar, I wouldn't wanna say anything other than what's in the textual record, but it is constantly fun to imagine what that might have felt like to move from one world to the other so quickly.

JH: Well, Jay Michaelson, and thank you for giving us a peek into those imaginings and wonderful conversation, and congratulations again on the success of your book.

DM: Thank you so much.

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