

## Rachel Elior

### Rabbi Nathan Adler of Frankfurt and the Controversy Surrounding Him\*

In the late 1770s and throughout the 1780s, while Hasidism was spreading through Eastern Europe, and while the Frankist-Sabbatian movement was establishing its center in Bruenn, Moravia, and in Offenbach, Germany, a distinct group of pietists arose in Frankfurt. The master of this fraternity was Rabbi Nathan ben Simon Adler Katz, who had been born in Frankfurt in 1741 and lived there until his death in 1800.<sup>1</sup>

During his lifetime Rabbi Nathan Adler was highly esteemed, greatly admired, and much beloved. He was regarded as a man of singular genius, a Halakhic authority, and a keen scholar, as a charismatic figure, as a fascinating religious innovator, a profound Kabbalist, an ethical model, and as the leader of a pietistic congregation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he aroused controversy and opposition and was persecuted and ultimately excommunicated. The Jewish community of Frankfurt promulgated bans against him and writs of excommunication in 1779 and 1789, and it permitted the composition and publication of a disparaging pamphlet against him in 1790.<sup>3</sup>

In the following I shall attempt to analyze the background of these excommunications and the influence of contemporary circumstances on the condemnation of Rabbi Nathan and also to show the common denominator between the pietists of Frankfurt and the Hasidic fellowships of Eastern Europe as it appeared from the standpoint of the controversialists.

---

\* An Elaborated Hebrew version of this article was published in *Zion* 59 (1994), pp. 31-64.

<sup>1</sup> For biographical information about Rabbi Nathan Adler and his family see Z. B. Auerbach, *Mishnat Rabbi Nathan*, Frankfurt am Main, 1862, in the introduction [henceforth: "Auerbach"]. See also A. Y. Ha-Cohen Schwartz, *Derekh ha-Nesher we-Torat Emet*, Satomara 1928, p. 4 [henceforth: "Derekh ha-Nesher"].

<sup>2</sup> See M. H. Horowitz, *Rabaney Frankfurt*, Jerusalem, 1972 [translation of the German edition of M. Horowitz, *Frankfurter Rabbinen 1885* (Reprint Jerusalem 1969)], pp. 151-154, 156 Appendix III, p. 293 [henceforth: "Horowitz"]. See also S. Sofer, *Hut ha-Meshullash*, (Pecs 1886) Muncacz 1894, pp. 16-24, 27-33, 55-56 [henceforth: "Sofer"]; M. Sofer, *Sefer Hatam Sofer*, Jerusalem 1974, II pp. 371-373; see Frankfurt am Main, *Memorbuch*, Heb. quart 1092a, III 536-804 (1780-1802), p. 762.

<sup>3</sup> For details see Horowitz, p. 155.

Rabbi Nathan Adler was the child of an old and illustrious family which had dwelled in Frankfurt for generations.<sup>4</sup> He stood out because of his conspicuous intellectual abilities and because of his extremely captivating charismatic personality. Likewise he was known for his extremely pious and ascetic ways. Along with his intellectual vigor, Rabbi Nathan expressed a deep concern with mysticism and had a tendency towards ecstatic prayer, and an abiding interest in the study of the Kabbalistic tradition, as well as in the creation of new ritual inspired by it.<sup>5</sup> He was renowned for his dreams and was known to live in the constant tension of divine revelation and prophetic visions as a result of his study of all aspects of the Kabbalah.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1770s he founded a House of Study for students of various ages<sup>7</sup>, established a synagogue with his own prayer quorum, and gathered a small congregation of Hasidim around him who were influenced by his piety and erudition, his charismatic personality, his Kabbalistic expertise, his divergence from the accepted norms, and his religious originality.<sup>8</sup> Under his inspiration they

<sup>4</sup> See *Derekh ha-Nesher*, pp. 4-5, Horowitz, pp. 151, 234-236.

<sup>5</sup> On his greatness as a Kabbalist see Sofer, pp. 16-17, 20; Horowitz, p. 153; *Derekh ha-Nesher*, p. 6. His teacher in Kabbalah was Rabbi Abraham Avush, the chief rabbinic justice of Frankfurt, who had previously served as a rabbi in many communities in the Lublin district and was known as a "master of the name." The book, *Ohel Avraham*, sings his praises, saying that when he was in the community of Lukabi, in the Lublin district, "his good name became more and more famous and thousands of Jews came to him to be cured in spirit and body, and there his book, *Po'el Yeshu'ot* about amulets and charms was written." See Simḥah Bunim Michelsohn, *Ohel Avraham*, Pieterkov 1901, p. 16a. The authors who wrote about Adler's biography did not take note of the influence of Rabbi Abraham upon the formation of his disciple's spiritual conduct.

<sup>6</sup> See Horowitz, p. 154, n. 12; *Derekh ha-Nesher*, p. 15, and cf. the testimony of his disciple: "in a moment I shall speak, for the holy names have true powers, from what I have seen with my eyes from that marvelous man, R[abbi] N[athan] A[dler], *Shw"t Hatam Sofer, Orah Hayim*, sig. 197.

<sup>7</sup> At the same time that R. Nathan Adler was teaching, a great spiritual awakening was taking place in Frankfurt. This pietistic movement for revival of piety in the Lutheran church was founded in Frankfurt at the end of the 17th century and was active in the first half of the 18th century. Its founder was J. P. Spener (1635-1705) who was inspired by Jakob Boehme and Angelus Silesius. He preached for repentance as a condition for profound spiritual revival and religious renovation. The movement cultivated religious pioussness, mystical inclination and ascetic virtues. Spener's students headed by Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702-1787) were active in the same time and place that Nathan Adler was active. It was not improbable that the spiritual pietistic climate that was prevailing in Frankfurt at that time influenced indirectly to some extent the spiritual awakening in the Jewish community.

<sup>8</sup> See Horowitz, pp. 154-156. Among his students were Rabbi Moses Sofer, known as the *Ḥatam Sofer*, who called his rabbi, "My teacher the genius and most pious of priests." On the meaning of his special relation with his teacher see the instructive article by J. Katz, "Kawim le-Biographia shel Ha-*Ḥatam Sofer*", in *Mehkarim ba-Qabbalah u-be-Toldot ha-Datot Mugashim le-Gershon Scholem*, Jerusalem 1968, pp. 115-145 [Hebr.]. The article has also been included in idem, *Halakhah ve-*

engaged in Kabbalah, established extreme customs of asceticism and purity, and attributed primary significance to heavenly signs, miracles, dreams and visions. Members of the group prayed in a separate quorum and adopted a particular ritual and separatist religious practice which was conspicuously different from that which had been common practice in synagogues for generations.<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Nathan Adler did not leave written evidence nor did he publish books during his lifetime. Therefore in drawing his portrait and in shedding light on the circumstances of his life we must depend upon the words of his disciples and associates, who testify to the weight of his personality and to his spiritual authority, as well as upon the testimony of his opponents and excommunicators, which reflects the public significance of his fame and authority. In the attempt to decipher the content of these testimonies in the light of the historical meaning which they inherently contain, both implicitly and explicitly, we would like to suggest that the events concerning Rabbi Nathan far surpass the local congregational level in importance and, in fact, reflect a much more widespread phenomenon which exerted great religious and social impact.

The hostile testimony was collected in an anonymous tract entitled

---

*Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 353-386. R. Eliezer Wallase later became the head of the yeshivah of Frankfurt. His grandson Abraham Geiger recounted his life in *Ha-Mazkir* V, pp. 77-79, 1862, and see Horowitz, pp. 156, 236. Rabbi Abraham Bing, the author of *Zikkaron Avraham* was the head of the rabbinical court of Wurzburg between 1796 -1838 and had a great influence in southern Germany; Rabbi Menahem Mendel Kargov who lived in Fiorda, the author of *Giduley Tahara al Mikvaot*; Rabbi Abraham Auerbach, the father of the author of *Mishnat Rabbi Nathan*; Rabbi Hayim Deitschmann, the chief of the rabbinical court of Kalin; Moses Helischau, mentioned with his rabbi in the excommunication of 1789, and see Geiger *op. cit.* for information about him; Rabbi Isaac Ariei Wormser, known as the Ba'al Shem of Michelstadt, whose biography is given in *Toldot Ba'al-Shem mi-Michelstadt*; cf. *The Baal Shem of Michelstadt*, trsl. M. F. Kuttner, Jerusalem - New York 1973; German edn. *Der Baalschem von Michelstadt*, repr. Basel 1982; Rabbi Joseph Meir Schneetuch, who was the chief rabbinical judge of Friedental, author of *Shw"t Rib"am Schneetuch*, Wolf Shatin who was the chief rabbinical judge at Dyhemfurth; Leib Karlburg and Leib Emrich, who was a *mohel*, and was excommunicated together with his teacher. In the Yizkor Register of the synagogue of the Hekdesh of Frankfurt, MS Jerusalem National library 8\*1465, fol. 169, it states regarding him "May the Lord remember the soul of the famous, holy, and abstinent Hasid ... our teacher and Rabbi Leib the son of Gumpel Emrich ... because in his youth he dragged his legs ... to learned scholars ... and all of his deeds were for the sake of heaven and most of his days he was occupied with Torah and good deeds. ... He castigated himself and fasted for thirty-five and a half years from sabbath to sabbath ... and the man who was pure and holy always went from place to place ... serving as a *mohel*." After the death of R. Nathan most of his students left Frankfurt. Many of them officiated as heads of rabbinical courts in Southern Germany and were deeply inspired by their Master.

<sup>9</sup> See Horowitz, pp. 153-154, 236.

*Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im* (Act of Deception), published in 1790.<sup>10</sup> This volume comprises the tracts and writs of excommunication issued by the Frankfurt community against Rabbi Nathan and his group. It presents a condemnation of the intentions and actions of the members of the circle, and a one-sided description by a contemporary of the circumstances that led to the exceptional steps taken by the community.<sup>11</sup> The main significance of the book lies in the date of its publication, soon after the events under discussion, when those concerned could read, protest, and respond to it. The material presented in the tract reflects the attitude of the community towards the controversy and an assessment of the figure of Rabbi Nathan according to the concepts and criteria which were accepted by contemporary opponents. The favorable testimony, reflecting the viewpoint of his congregation, was published later and is found in the writings of his followers, primarily in the works of his closest disciple, the *Hatam Sofer* (Rabbi Moses Sofer of Frankfurt 1762-1840) and in the biographical traditions which were collected in the book by his grandson, Solomon Sofer, *Hut ha-Meshullash* (The Triple Thread, Pecs 1887). The enthusiastic assessment, presented from the viewpoint of members of succeeding generations, is found in two books: one by Zvi Benjamin Auerbach, the son of Rabbi Adler's disciple Abraham Auerbach, *Mishnat Rabbi Nathan* (The Teaching of Rabbi Nathan, Frankfurt 1862); and the other by Abraham Judah ha-Cohen Schwartz, *Derekh ha-Nesher we-Torah Emet* (The Path of the Eagle [wordplay on the name Adler] and the Torah of Truth, Satomara, 1928).

On the basis of these works, Abraham Geiger and Mordecai Horowitz, Simon Dubnow and Yekutiel Gruenwald, Jacob Katz and Mordecai Wilenski

---

<sup>10</sup> See Steinschneider, *Ha-Mazkir* V, 1862, p. 27, and Geiger, *ibid.*, p. 78. Steinschneider determined that the author of *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im* was Leib Wetzlar, one of the enlightened Jews of Frankfurt, and he disagreed with the earlier view of W. Zeitlin, which attributed the work to Wolf Heidenheim. See also *Yeshurun*, vol. X, p. 111 and the bibliography there. In the introduction to the second edition of *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, Budapest 1822, Yekutiel Judah Greenwald reviewed the various surmises regarding the author's identity. See also S. Dubnow, *Toldot ha-Hasidut*, Tel Aviv [1931], 1975, p. 440, and M. Wilenski, *Hasidim u-Mitnagdim*, Jerusalem 1970, pt. I, p. 324. See further G. Scholem, "Die letzten Kabbalisten in Deutschland", *Judaica III*, Frankfurt 1973, p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> The wording of the second writ of excommunication is also presented in the collection *Shever-Posh'im*, edited by Rabbi David of Makov and printed in the book by M. Wilenski, pt. II, p. 96 and in S. Dubnow, *Toldot ha-Hasidut*, 1975 (3rd edn.) p. 438; cf. the German edn. *Geschichte des Chassidismus*, Jerusalem 1969, II, p. 315. The wording of the first excommunication was printed in Horowitz, in: Dubnow, p. 436, German edn., II, p. 316f., and in: Wilenski according to the version in *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, and see there, pt. I, pp. 324-326. See below for the wording according to the community register. The community of Frankfurt was not hasty in using excommunications and actually it used them very rarely, preferring to exile those who did not conform to the community order, rather than declare writs of excommunication against them.

all described Rabbi Nathan, the background to the controversy, and the matter of the tracts and excommunications issued against him.<sup>12</sup> However, these scholars disagreed about the connection between the events leading to the excommunication of the pietist sect in Frankfurt and other events which occurred close in time and place, such as the anti-Hasidic excommunications published in Eastern Europe.

Most of these scholars doubted that there was any direct connection between the formation of Adler's group and the growth of the Hasidic movement<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless one cannot disregard the closeness in time between the awakening of Jewish pietism in Frankfurt and the formation of Hasidic circles in Eastern Europe: neither the fact that the group in Frankfurt also called themselves "Hasidim," nor the analogous ways in which both groups deviated from the common practices of the community, or the similarity of the charges raised both in the excommunications of Frankfurt and in Eastern Europe- all of which begs for interpretation.

Both the hostile and favorable testimonies show that Rabbi Nathan's aberration from common practice in the name of charismatic authority was largely similar with respect to its spiritual motivations and social significance to the deviations instituted by the Hasidim of the *BESHT* from the traditional patterns and accepted frameworks of the communities in which they were active. Moreover, the persecution in both instances was bound up with fear both of the assertion of the unrestricted authority of men inspired by the holy spirit and of the spiritual separatism which, in the opinion of the opponents, was derived from it, as we shall see below.

Perusal of the tracts and excommunications issued in 1779 and 1789 along with an examination of the hostile testimony and a comparison with the parallel tradition of favorable testimony, which confirms the facts mentioned but evaluates their meaning differently, elicits five substantial arguments against Rabbi Nathan and his followers.

1. Substantial alterations in the ritual and in the manner of prayer which led to the creation of a separate prayer quorum and to seclusion from the community.

The most prominent arguments related to use of the prayerbook of the *ARI* according to the Sephardic rite, to recitation of the prayers both in the Sephardic pronunciation and in a deviant manner, as well as to concluding the Eighteen Benedictions of the afternoon and evening services with the benediction normally recited only in the morning in the Ashkenazic rite, "Grant peace ....," rather than the one beginning "Great peace ..."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See notes above for detailed references to the works of the scholars cited.

<sup>13</sup> See Dubnow, p. 441, Wilenski, pt. I, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> See Horowitz, p. 154 and also Rabbi Abraham Loewenstam, *Zror ha-Hayim*, Amsterdam 1820, *Kuntres we-Neginotai Yenagen*; see also Abraham Simhah Bunim Michelsohn, *Shemen ha-Tov*,

2. Notable excess in asceticism and fasts, in abstinence, and in severity regarding undue insistence on the laws of purity and impurity.

This led to the prohibition of eating and drinking with those not belonging to the group for fear of violation of kashrut, to separation from it for fear of impurity, and to condemnation by the community which continued to follow the common practices.<sup>15</sup>

3. Change in religious practice with respect to prevalent custom.

This included a different circumcision ceremony, the wearing of two sets of phylacteries, the attachment of ritual fringes to women's garments, and the recitation of the priestly blessing every day.<sup>16</sup>

4. Change in the standard patterns of sacred and secular times, independent determination of the times that holidays and festivals begin, and the assertion of freedom to determine the calendar.

5. Study of the Kabbalah, concern with dreams, secrets, and prophetic visions while claiming an immediate relationship with the upper worlds and knowledge of hidden things. These preoccupations aroused dread within the community.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the charges levelled against Rabbi Nathan and his group were similar to those raised seven years previously in polemical writings and excommunications issued against the Hasidim of Eastern Europe<sup>18</sup>. The similarity in the polemical description of the idiosyncratic practice derives from the negative assessment of features stemming from a common tradition, the Kabbalistic tradition, which draws upon the mystical inspiration and charismatic leadership prevalent among both the Hasidim and other pietists throughout Europe.

The position represented by Rabbi Nathan Adler was essentially individualistic, as opposed to that of the traditional community, where there was generally no opportunity for non-conformist individuals and groups to exist and act in freedom without depending upon the traditional socio-religious frameworks. Accordingly, the Kabbalistic Hasid does not need supportive confirmation from the congregation for his stance before God. Nor is he required to observe the details of the tradition in the prevalent fashion.

Pieterkov 1905, p. 92, par. 78, and see Sofer, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> See *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, pp. 9-10 and cf. ed. Greenwald introduction, p. 8, and see *Derekh ha-Nesher*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> See *Derekh ha-Nesher*, p. 24, and the reference notes there, and cf. Horowitz, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> See *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, pp. 17-21 and Horowitz, p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> See Horowitz, pp. 154, 157, n. 25, and Wilenski, I, pp. 44-49. The excommunication of Brody condemns the Hasidim for praying in separate quorums, for praying in the Sephardic rite from the prayerbook of the *ARI*, for making alterations in the order of prayers, and for tardiness in reciting them, for wearing white garments, for maintaining separate ritual slaughtering with polished knives, and for studying only Kabbalah.

But rather, he is permitted to inaugurate new religious ritual, drawing upon his religious inspiration and the Kabbalistic tradition or based on the authority of a renewed revelation granted in a vision, dream, or spiritual ecstasy [*'aliyat ha-neshamah*].

Rabbi Nathan and his group, like the Hasidim in Eastern Europe, did not perceive themselves as deviants or sinners. Rather, they viewed themselves as exponents of the Kabbalistic tradition, not subject to the authority of the community in spiritual matters. These men advocated a structure of values which drew upon Kabbalistic literature and was based on the authority of vision or renewed revelation. Hence they did not acknowledge the authority of the rabbis who excommunicated them. They ignored the excommunications, continuing to act in their own way. From their point of view the alterations they instituted had been made in the spirit of the Kabbalistic ethos with the force of charismatic inspiration, and they did not require the agreement of the community or of its leadership. However, it was not only the force of the charismatic personality or the outcome of mystical ecstasy which stood behind these changes. They derived primarily from penetrating scrutiny of the Kabbalistic mythos, from the adoption of its conceptual system and from the assertion of freedom of ritual creativity in its name. The structure common to all of the changes in the prayer ritual, in the severity of the asceticism, in the insistence on the laws of purity, and in the innovations which were made in customs and in the order of time were all anchored in a Kabbalistic ethos which attributed mystical intentions to the prayers and to the performance of commandments in a manner which bound the total structure of divine service with the concepts of the Kabbalah and its hidden dimensions. Profound meditation upon the meanings of the Kabbalistic tradition shaped the idiosyncratic practices of the pietistic Hasidim, wrought their charismatic inspiration, and sustained their contents.

The Kabbalistic ethos which was crystallized in Safed during the sixteenth century among the "Holy Fellowships"<sup>19</sup>, is expressed in Kabbalistic ethical works and in the literature of the Lurianic *Tiqqunim*. It was disseminated from the late sixteenth century, throughout the seventeenth century, until the mid-eighteenth century among groups of Kabbalists and ascetes and also among societies of Sabbatians and Hasidim.<sup>20</sup> These circles delved deeply

---

<sup>19</sup> See Ben-Zion Dinur, *Be-Mifneh ha-Dorot*, pp. 161-163, and the detailed references of notes 16 and 17. See also S. Z. Shazar, "Zofayikh Zfat", *Orey Dorot*, Jerusalem 1971, pp. 11-30.

<sup>20</sup> See Dinur, pp. 159-181. The publication of *Sefer ha-Kawanot* of the *ARI* in 1620 had a decisive influence on the creation of the Kabbalistic ethos. Books such as *Sha'arey Kedushah* by Rabbi Hayim Vital, *Naggid u-Mezaweh* by Jacob Zemah, *Sefer-Haredim* by Eliezer Azikri, and *Maggid-Mesharim* by Joseph Karo also had a great influence on consolidating the details of Kabbalistic customs.

into the intention which binds the performance of a commandment and the underlying reason for it with Kabbalistic concepts and dimensions, which are connected to the higher realm. For that reason they were punctilious about the minutest details of religious practice, and they tended towards separatism and isolation and insisted on separate prayer and ritual slaughter and on pietistic and ascetic practices inspired by the Lurianic doctrine of intentions, the Kabbalistic doctrine of reincarnation, and other mystical teachings. All of these customs and teachings, which initially pertained to theurgic intentions concerning *Ge'ulat ha-Shekhinah*, were also means to prepare the way for mystical exaltation and the attainment of the holy spirit on its various levels of dreams, visions, revelations, celestial voices, and prophecies.<sup>21</sup> The new customs which they inaugurated and the instructions which they committed to writing were a matter for an elite and did not obligate the entire community<sup>22</sup>. On the contrary, the esotericism which characterized these circles of ascetes, saints, and pietists and the spiritual and moral height that characterized their adepts created a set pattern of relations of distance and sanctity, of separatism and seclusion, which were accepted and honored by the community, so long as the changes in religious ritual and customs of prayer which were directed towards achieving mystical elevation remained outside the public realm. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century a change began to take place in the status of esotericism following the extensive printing of Kabbalistic literature, on the one hand, and under the influence of the Hasidic, Sabbatian-Frankist, and Kabbalistic societies, on the other.<sup>23</sup> The spread of the influence of these ecstatic and ascetic mystical ideas into constantly enlarging circles caused social ferment and undermined the communal hierarchy, for the exceptional influence of the bearers of spiritualistic views upon community life and the circle of their influence was far greater than their actual numbers. The feeling of instability and the precariousness of the accepted tradition, which contributed to the weakening of the status of the congregation in the matters of spiritual leadership, led the community into conflict. Viewing itself as representing the values of the Halakhah and the religious tradition and as responsible for preserving the

---

<sup>21</sup> See R. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic*, Philadelphia 1980 (2nd. edn.), pp. 38-83.

<sup>22</sup> The concepts *hesger*, *bney 'aliya* (chosen few), *yehidey segula*, *perushim* and *hevrah qedoshah* all indicate seclusion and elitism.

<sup>23</sup> On the printing and circulation of the literature of Lurianic Tiqqunim in the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century and on the flourishing of the Kabbalistic liturgy and its influence see Z. Gris, *Sifrut ha-Hanhagot*, Jerusalem 1990, intro., pp. xiv-xxi, 41-102.



traditional structure, the community fought against the broad expansion of the pietistic conduct. For as long as these had been the customs of an elite which derived legitimization from the community, they were viewed with approval. However, when idiosyncratic particularity became widespread, the community took a dim view of it.<sup>24</sup>

The alterations, non-conformism, and deviations which were condemned by the authors of the anti-Hasidic excommunications were not generally recent innovations of the 1770s and 1780s. Rather, almost all of them were founded upon the Kabbalistic tradition and the pietistic, ascetic customs which had long been prevalent among circles of Kabbalists and holy societies. That is to say, the change did not hinge upon the content of the innovations or upon alteration of religious practice, but rather upon the widespread application and dissemination of these changes. Innovations such as holding a separate prayer quorum, use of the *ARI* rite, wearing white clothing, special customs of ritual slaughter, a tendency towards asceticism and insistence upon abstinence in sanctity and purity, along with intensive study of the Kabbalah and the assertion of freedom to innovate rituals are mentioned explicitly in connection with members of the *Kloyz of Brody* and also those in other holy fraternities in other places in Europe, which acted with the permission and agreement of the various communities.<sup>25</sup> As noted, as long as these changes took place within the closed realm of an elite and did not spread to the community beyond its confines, the community did not intervene. However, from the moment when the esoteric barriers were removed and the idiosyncratic customs of the holy societies became widely known, and some of the separatist circles began to appeal to a broad public, a change also occurred in the position taken by the communal leadership. The deepened contemplation of religious worship and renewed illumination of the tradition, which led to the establishment of original religious patterns and to innovation in customs were grasped as a threatening divergence from the accepted order, a deviation which demanded an appropriate response. The new norms were viewed as a threat to existing practice and to accepted authority and as a blow to the values of the congregation.

In *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, which, as noted, was written in Frankfurt in 1790,

---

<sup>24</sup> The criticism of Rabbi Moses of Satnov, author of *Mishmeret-ha-Qodesh*, Zolkwo 1746 and of Rabbi Solomon Helmo, the author of *Merkevet-Mishneh*, from the first half of the eighteenth century reflect this tension. See G. Scholem, "Shtey ha-Eduyot ha-Qedumot al *Havurot ha-Hasidim we-ha-BESHT*" [Hebr.], *Tarbiz* XX, pp. 228-240, and see Dinur, *Bemifneh ha-Dorot*, pp. 87, 135-139, 161, 170-180. Cf. Piekarz, *Bi-Yemey Zemihat ha-Hasidut*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 338-346.

<sup>25</sup> See N. M. Gelber, "Toldot Yehudey Brody" in: *Arim we-Imahot be-Yisrael*, Jerusalem 1956, vol. VI, pp. 62-73. 332, and see B. Z. Dinur, *Bemifneh ha-Dorot*, pp. 161-162; S. Dubnow, p. 121. J. Katz, *Masoret u-Mashber*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 254-261. 204.

the author interprets the separatism entailed by changes in custom and the freedom expressed in ritual innovations as rebellion against the accepted authority and as impugning the ways of the community:

For they have invented new laws for themselves and intend to rebel against the Rabbis. ... They slandered the Jewish people, their brothers, and ruled against our bread and wine, not to eat of our food and not to drink of our wine, and not to use our vessels, and never to mingle with us, for fear lest they be contaminated by our bread or by the wine of our libations, for we are regarded as Samaritans by them and as Karaites we appear in their eyes.

The excessive scrupulousness regarding purity and impurity, the exaggerated piety, and the resultant abstinence which is derived from these were viewed as arrogance and separatism, as an insult and criticism. Separatism in the prayer ritual, in its place and time, as well as the insistence upon separate food, on different manners of dress and behavior - all these practices, which were initiated for the purpose of sanctification, mystical elevation, and attaining the holy spirit, were interpreted as a threat to the prevalent hierarchy of values and as a challenge to the Halakhah and to the tradition represented by the community.

An interesting expression of the opposite point of view, that of the members of the separate prayer quorums, is found in the writings of Rabbi Nathan Adler's contemporary, published about the same time as the group's first excommunication in response to the arguments of those who were offended by separatism:

It emerges from this, that in the same manner Israel was separate and secluded from the multitude in two ways: when eating, they would not eat the same food with them; and also that they would not be mingled with them, only that they should be secluded in the clouds of Israel and not mingle with the mixed multitude. ... "Why should you make a seclusion from us and pray and study by yourselves, and also not eat our food?" I myself, my eyes and not a stranger's, have seen this war that is always waged against him who wishes to be sanctified and to seclude himself and pray in a quorum of his own, since it is impossible to pray in a public where they pray out of routine habit, and for several similar reasons. In the matter of eating, this generation cannot be trusted, since anyone may slaughter, even someone who is not expert in the laws of slaughtering and does not fear heaven ... and certainly anyone who withdraws from the food of the world must be considered holy, because there are not many people expert in the laws of salting ... and certainly someone who wishes to be sanctified will not sit at their table. ... and it is a sign for all generations that the pre-eminent worshiper should form a separate quorum with particular people

*and also not eat with the masses at the same table at all. ... and the sign for all generations is that they should make a House of Study for select individual Jews, who will be separate from the masses of the people, for it is impossible that they should be together.*<sup>26</sup>

The writer is Rabbi Jacob Joseph ha-Cohen of Polonnoye, who published this work in 1780 after his effort to maintain simultaneously both the Kabbalistic ethos of withdrawal and separation and the status of the rabbi of a congregation, an effort which met with failure and ended with his discharge from the rabbinate of the community of Shargorod.<sup>27</sup> He interprets the Biblical story of the children of Israel and the multitude as an allegory of the relation between the groups of Hasidim and recluses who pray separately among themselves, on the one hand, as against the whole community, which argues against them and disputes them, on the other hand. Sanctification and elevation are made conditional upon isolation and seclusion from the surrounding world, for the religious norms prevailing in the traditional community were insufficient in the view of the circles of pietistic Hasidim, who viewed the prayer, ritual slaughter, and conduct of the congregation, at least according to the testimony of Rabbi Jacob Joseph, as the practices of the rabble.

On the strength of independent and unlimited spiritual authority, the pietistic Hasidic circles instituted alterations in matters of ritual purity, ritual slaughter, circumcision, and phylacteries, and they asserted autonomy in determining the calendar and setting the hour when sabbaths and festivals began and ended. These changes were viewed as a manifestation of sectarianism and were interpreted as rebellion against the authority of the community. The community leadership set out to block spiritual separatism and used excommunication to re-establish and strengthen its authority. It defined those who rejected its authority as a sect and demanded their excommunication.

The Community Register of Frankfurt<sup>28</sup> records the wording of the proclamation issued in the synagogue in the month of Elul, 1779:

[In Hebrew:] Behold, [in Yiddish:] listen gentlemen, I have been ordered [in Hebrew:] to proclaim in the name of [in Aramaic:] the holy congregation, may the Lord bless it and keep it, [in Hebrew:] in conjunction with the Lord wardens, may the Lord bless and keep them, that it is forbidden to the master of Torah, his honor the Rabbi, Rabbi Nathan the son of our Rabbi Simon Adler Katz, and to the master of Torah, Rabbi Lizer Wali to form a quorum

<sup>26</sup> (*Toldot Ya'aqov Yosef*, parsh. *Naso*)

<sup>27</sup> See Dimur, p. 154; M. Piekarz, p. 391, and cf. Y. Hasdai pp. 150.

<sup>28</sup> The Community Register of Frankfurt is in the National Library in Jerusalem in the manuscript department, no. 4\*662. For a detailed description of the register, including a valuable index, see M. Nadav, "*Pinqas Kahal Frankfurt de-Main*," *Kiryat Sefer*, vol. 31 (1957), pp. 507-516.

of ten and to pray in their home, and any member of our congregation who goes to their house to pray in their house in a quorum whether a householder or other member of our community, he is excommunicated and banned.<sup>29</sup>

The congregation's power of coercion and ability to exert authority over its members was ineffective, as we see from the following document in the register:

Inasmuch as the aforementioned Torah scholar Rabbi Nathan ben Simon Adler Katz did not heed the ruling of the congregation and the wardens, may God bless and keep them, and did not obey the proclamation which was publicly proclaimed in the synagogue and once again gathered a quorum in his home to pray, against the ruling of the congregation and the wardens, may God bless and keep them, in conjunction with the Chief Justice, long may he live, and two courts, may God bless and keep them, it was agreed to send [instructions] to the aforementioned Rabbi Nathan not to pray with any quorum at all except in synagogues which have permission from our congregation, excommunication is proclaimed in the following wording, which we sent to him ... The aforementioned Rabbi Nathan is proclaimed excommunicated and no one is to pray in a quorum of ten with him. Today is the eleventh of Elul 1779.<sup>30</sup>

The Community Register reflects ferment and dissent regarding the multiplicity of synagogues and private prayer quorums. In 1783 nine private quorums are mentioned in the register.<sup>31</sup> And in 1790 the author of *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im* condemns some of them in harsh language, calling Adler's quorum a sect: "When that sect began to do evil and sin"<sup>32</sup>.

The changes and alterations in religious customs which took place among the Kabbalists and Hasidim because of spiritual and mystical motivations, giving rise to their spiritual separatism, prove retrospectively to have been of weighty social significance.

The pietistic Hasidic circles were viewed as sects both in Eastern and Western Europe because they saw themselves as fellowships of pious persons whose ways demanded social segregation, and because they were viewed as rejecting the community from which they had emerged. The remarks of the author of *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im* describing the group around Rabbi Nathan are consistent with this conception. Since the Hasidim viewed the customs of the community as unsuitable, according to the testimony of this group's opponents, the self-imposed social separation was perceived as a barrier between the members of the group and the rest of the community. From the point of view of those members of the community who condemned Rabbi

<sup>29</sup> Register of the Frankfurt Community, fol. 250a.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 250a.

<sup>31</sup> Doc. 488-490. See Nadav, p. 513.

<sup>32</sup> p. 25.

Nathan, the meaning of the claim that the manners of the community were unacceptable to him and his group was that they attributed absolute validity to their own manner of serving God, thereby challenging the validity of the traditional ways of the community; however, from their own point of view, the members of the group regarded themselves as the bearers of the Kabbalistic tradition. Thus they were not subject to the rule of the community in spiritual matters, and they were obliged to raise a barrier between the congregation and themselves in order to conserve the Kabbalistic ethos in proper fashion.<sup>33</sup>

The great tension between the members of the separate prayer quorums and the community leadership grew stronger against the background of the prevailing view, which saw their exaggerated piety as a distinct sign of the Sabbatian movement.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, the opponents suspected that, behind the facade of sanctity and abstemiousness of the separatist prayer quorums were deceptions, lies, and trickery intended to undermine the foundations of the existing order.

For that reason the opponents of Hasidism in Eastern Europe tended to accuse the Hasidic circles of belonging to the Sabbatian movement in its various guises, to define them as a sect, and to persecute them ruthlessly.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> On the economical significance of the spiritual segregation and on the implication entailed in it see Nadav, p. 513.

<sup>34</sup> See G. Scholem, "Tenu'at ha-Shabta'ut be-Polin," in *Mehqarim u-Meqorot le-Toldot ha-Shabta'ut ve-Gilguleyha*, Jerusalem 1974, p. 80; cf. M. Balaban, *Le-Toledot ha-Tenn'ah ha-Frankit*, Tel Aviv 1934, I pp. 53-66.

<sup>35</sup> One should note the remarks of the scribe of the community of Brody, who copied the writ of excommunication of 1772: "When the above letter reached us [in Brody] we were thunderstruck by what our eyes saw and upon hearing that the conflagration which broke out several years ago has not yet been extinguished and that bands of evil-doers still cavort among us" (my emphasis). See Wilenski, I, p. 44. Wilenski believed that these remarks referred to the controversy in Vilna which was known in Brody, but "they did not take action until they received the letter from Vilna" (*ibid.*, n. 59). However, he seems to be in error, for the remarks most probably refer to the circles of Sabbatian and Frankist Hasidim who were excommunicated in Brody in 1752, 1753, 1756 and 1760. The language of the proclamation supports this surmise: "once again awakened [our emphasis] *gevorin* [in Yiddish] among our nation *sects and societies* [our emphasis]." These my remarks indicate that the anti-Hasidic excommunications were directed against the renewal of the phenomenon of Sabbatianism and not against what was, in the opinion of the excommunicators, a distinct new essence. Brody rabbinical court was leading the excommunications against Sabbatianism and initiated the bans against Jonathan Eybeschuetz Leib Prosnitz and Jacob Frank in the previous decades. I believe that Wilenski was wrong in minimizing the importance of the accusation of Sabbatianism which stood behind the excommunications. See Wilenski, I, p. 18. Even after the excommunications of 1757 and 1759 most Sabbatianism believers remained within the Jewish community. See G. Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, p. 136.

The fate of Rabbi Nathan, too, was influenced to a great extent by the Sabbatian-Frankist threat, for at that time the distinctions between the Hasidic pietists, the Sabbatian Hasidim, and the Frankist Hasidim were increasingly blurred, and any manifestation of separatism which originated with a separate prayer quorum was suspect, becoming the target of attacks and excommunication if it did not receive the explicit approval of the community and the authorization of its leadership.

Various testimony points to manifestations of tension between the pietistic Hasidic circles and the traditional leadership throughout the eighteenth century. It seems that since the mass conversion of the Doenmeh in 1683, the Eybeschuetz-Emden controversy and the unprecedented conversion of the Frankists in Lvov in 1759, all pietistic spiritualism was suspected of being antinomian, and the various circles of Hasidim were thought to hold heretical beliefs and do strange deeds, as it emerges from various accounts.<sup>36</sup> However, it appears that the identification of the Sabbatian-Frankist groups with the various Hasidic circles was not unequivocal in the consciousness of the religious and social authorities until the 1770s, the years when excommunications against the Hasidim began to be promulgated in Eastern Europe, including the first writ of excommunication against Rabbi Nathan Adler and the members of his circle.

It does not appear that the proclamation of the writs of excommunication in both Eastern and Western Europe in the 1770s has yet been linked to a complex of critically important events which took place at the same time and which left its threatening mark upon the Jewish world. I refer to the Sabbatian activity at the end of the 1760s and to the travels of Jacob Frank (1726-1791) throughout Eastern and Western Europe after he was freed from imprisonment in Czestochowa in 1772, when he began the systematic dissemination of his doctrines by means of emissaries, epistles, and books.<sup>37</sup>

The letter of Yeruham ben Hananiah Lippmann of Czernowitz, Solomon ben Rabbi Elisha Shor, the Kabbalist of Rohatyn, and his brother Nathan Neta on the life of Frank and on his doctrine which was published by Abraham Jacob Brower<sup>38</sup> states explicitly:

Also upon his departure from Czestochowa in 1772 he sent us, the undersigned, to several towns, such as Lublin, Lvov, and Brod

<sup>36</sup> See n. 24 above and cf. Piekarczyk, *Bi-Yemey Zemīhat ha-Hasidut*, pp. 310, 324-326, 331-338.

<sup>37</sup> Czestochowa was captured by the Russians in August, 1772, and then Frank was freed from prison. On his doings during the 1770s see A. Kraushar, *Frank ve-'Adato 1726-1816*, Warsha 1896 (Transl. N. Sokolov) pp. 272-273, II, pp. 15-16; A. I. Brower, *Galicja ve-Yehudeiha*, Jerusalem 1965, pp. 267-275; G. Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, pp. 137-138. H. Levine, *Ha-Khronika-Te'udah le-Toldot Ya'aqov Frank u-Tenu'ato*, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 76-86. On his intensive propaganda in the late 1760s and early 1770s see Kroisher, I, pp. 257, 272-273.

<sup>38</sup> See Brower, p. 272.

and to the other cities, on a mission from him to announce to all those who fear the Lord so as to know that the time will come when all the Jews will be forced to convert. For the decree is from God alone, be it in whatever way it may be, and whoever comes in the shelter of faithfully to the house of the God of Jacob, the God of Jacob will help him, so that he shall not be lost forever, for in His shadow we shall live among the nations.

According to the accepted historical view, Frank was released from prison in the summer of 1772, when Czestochowa was captured by the Russians. According to the Frankist chronicle, Jacob Frank was set free on January 21, 1772[3]<sup>39</sup> and travelled through various places in Poland, Moravia, and Walachia. His journey caused a spiritual awakening and waves of conversion, arousing increased suspicion against all pietist circles and separate prayer quorums. It also might have led to the imposition of excommunication against them, for in the consciousness of the opponents the common denominator between the pietist Hasidim, the Hasidim of the *BESHT*, and the Sabbatian-Frankist Hasidim was greater than the substantial differences among them.

The author of *Hut ha-Meshullash*, the grandson of the *Hatam-Sofer*, described the background of Rabbi Nathan's excommunication in that spirit:

At that time the country was full of noise and turmoil, and the war against the Hasidim grew stronger in the lands of Poland and Russia, and the Gaon ... Elijah of Vilna of blessed memory, and with him other great Jewish scholars, sent proclamations to all of the great Jewish communities, telling them to persecute the Hasidim and to do battle against them for changing their pronunciation and changing the words of the prayer and other established practices. ... And the great Jewish leaders especially feared change and innovation at that time, because then the sect of Shabbetai *Zevi*, may his name be blotted out, ruled and did damage and destroyed in Poland and Germany, and the members of that sect also studied books of Kabbalah with hints and numerology, cloaking themselves in the garment of the pious. ... And it was not clear whether they belonged to the *Zevi*-ites, whose roots gave forth bitter wormwood or to the Hasidim, who held true faith in their hearts, and they feared the *Zevi*-ites, who were similar to the Hasidim. Since they saw in the practices and ways of the followers of Rabbi Nathan Adler of blessed memory several things which were similar to the practices of the Hasidim, and they did not want these things to spread in their city and state, they therefore sought to prevent these people from [doing] this, and in Prague the rabbinical court at that time forbade any study of the Kabbalah for that reason.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See Levine, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> *Hut ha-Meshullash*, p. 29. Cf. the wording of the prohibition against studying Kabbalah because the Frankists depended upon esoteric doctrine, in G. Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, pp. 123-124.

All of the Hasidic circles, both the ascetic and reclusive groups and the followers of the *BESHT*, as well as the Sabbatians and Frankists, formed their worldview under the inspiration of the Kabbalistic tradition, and they consolidated patterns of thought and practice which were decisively influenced by Kabbalistic ethical literature and its mystical-visionary trends. Because of this, the changes in widely accepted customs which were wrought by various circles of Hasidim, and the alterations which characterized them in their methods of divine worship, along with their tendency towards charismatic inspiration and authority, were too similar in the view of those observing them from without to permit clear distinctions to be made between the circles remaining faithful to the traditional values and those which deviated from them.<sup>41</sup> The community leadership, which had to struggle against the renewed Sabbatian heresy did not delve deeply into these differences but rather took a general negative position regarding all of the pietist groups which acted without the agreement and permission of the community.

The presence of the Frankists in Poland and Galicia, in Russia and in Moravia throughout the 1770s,<sup>42</sup> aroused tension and fear and a feeling of precariousness. Indeed, the numbers of those who were bound to the Sabbatian-Frankist movement in various ways, from being secret supporters to open apostasy, was too great not to leave a mark. The leadership arose to constrain this social deviance and to expel the rebels who, by their actions and behavior, damaged the values of the community. Excommunication was the principal means used to establish the boundaries of the congregation's common identity and to erect a barrier against spiritual separatism in all its varieties, from ascetic pietism through ecstatic mysticism to antinomianism.

It is not implausible to postulate that the letters and emissaries which Frank sent to his supporters and devotees in the city of Brod in the early 1770s<sup>43</sup> could have direct or indirect influence on the enthusiastic participation of the leaders of that community in the anti-Hasidic excommunications of 1772.<sup>44</sup> In any event, the Gaon of Vilna is known to have excommunicated the Hasidim in that year because he believed that "the sect of Hasidim" contained "many heretics from the sect of Sh[abbetai] Z[evi]," as it is quoted in his name in *Shever Posh'im*, the anti-Hasidic

---

<sup>41</sup> See G. Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>42</sup> See Levine, above n. 29.

<sup>43</sup> See Brower, p. 272, and cf. evidence regarding the rise of members of the sect in Warsaw from 1770 onward in G. Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, p. 137.

<sup>44</sup> See Wilenski, I, pp. 44-49, and n. 35 above.



pamphlet<sup>45</sup>. For their part the Hasidic leaders protested angrily but ineffectively against being included among the Sabbatian heretics.<sup>46</sup>

If we may assume that the promulgation of the anti-Hasidic writs of excommunication of the 1770s was influenced by the Frankist emissaries dispatched throughout Europe at the end of the previous decade, by Jacob Frank's travels during the early 1770s, and by the ferment that was aroused in his wake, then in all likelihood these writs of excommunication directed against the Sabbatian-Frankist heresy exerted an indirect influence on the first ban against Rabbi Nathan and his circle. Jacob Frank's decision to settle in Offenbach, just across the river from Frankfurt, in 1787, certainly possessed significance with respect to the second writ of excommunication issued against Rabbi Nathan's group in 1789.<sup>47</sup>

During the 1780s the Frankfurt community struggled against Rabbi Nathan and his group, while at the same time the Sabbatian-Frankist threat grew ever more intense. At the end of the decade, Frank had gathered hundreds of followers in his stronghold in Offenbach<sup>48</sup> and his supporters everywhere were numbered in the thousands. These developments cannot have exerted a moderating influence on the struggle, but rather they led to the second writ of excommunication of 1789, which went beyond the preceding writ in its extremism.<sup>49</sup> An interesting and exceptional trait in the polemics of the 1780s is the place occupied in the proclamations and excommunications by the dreamers and prophetic visionaries who were common in Rabbi Nathan's circle: the testimony shows the great importance attributed by the members of the community and of the circle to dreams and their influence:

For they began to terrify the people with their dreams and to frighten them with the lie of their visions, and this is the sum of their wisdom and understanding: to arouse the power of their imaginations while they lie prone upon their beds, and whoever dreams the most is the most praiseworthy in their society.<sup>50</sup>

The dreams were grasped by Rabbi Nathan's circle as visions, prophetic revelations, knowledge of the future, and direct contact with upper worlds. But by the community leaders they were viewed as deceptions and fraud,

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 77b.

<sup>46</sup> See Wilenski, II, pp. 178-179, and cf. the index under "Shabta'ut." See also D. Z. Heilman, *Igrot Ba'al ha-Tanya*, sig. 77, 83, 86. Cf. R. Elijor, "Wikuah Minsk" in: *Mehqarey Yerushalayim be-Mahshevet Yisrael*, I (1982), pp. 202-203.

<sup>47</sup> See Levine, p. 100, and see the introduction by Greenwald to *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> See Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, p. 138, and see n. 200 there.

<sup>49</sup> See Horowitz, pp. 156-157 and cf. Wilenski, II, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, p. 17

manipulative means of influencing the masses. The second excommunication, of 1798, is, as noted, entirely devoted to that matter:

Those bans which were written in the Community Register and announced publicly in a proclamation in the synagogue in 1779, which have already been spoken repeatedly, prominently, with full force and power ... it is additionally appended to all of these, so that those false prophets and their like should no longer continue to frighten and terrify the people.<sup>51</sup>

It goes on to state that it is strongly forbidden:

for any man in the world to threaten and terrify and frighten *zein wird* [in Yiddish] with their dreams and signs and vain visions and seductions, since this sect has already made people act wickedly and sin. Hence the dreamer of dreams is to be rejected and banned and ostracized and set apart from all holy Jewish ceremonies.<sup>52</sup>

Rabbi Nathan's group could have based its practices upon a rich Kabbalistic literature that attributes decisive importance to dreams. The Zohar views the dream as a revelation granted to the soul from the world of angels and interprets the dreams of the righteous as close in essence to prophecy. A good deal of the Kabbalistic literature of the sixteenth century was written under the inspiration of dreams, visions, and illuminations possessing the force of celestial revelation. Books such as *Galya-Raza*, *Hayyat-ha-Qaneh*, *Maggid-Mesharim*, and *Sefer ha-Hezyonot* publicly disseminated the authority of dream and vision and determined their significance as celestial revelation and as a sign from the upper world.<sup>53</sup>

The various Hasidic circles in Eastern and Western Europe, drawing upon the heritage of Kabbalistic literature, attributed great importance to dreams, were interpreting them as an expression of penetration beyond the confines of time and space, of immediate contact with upper worlds, and of attaining the holy spirit - goals which the entire Kabbalistic, ascetic, and ecstatic ethos was directed to achieve. Concepts such as stripping away of corporeality, annihilation of being, *she'elat halom* (questioning through a dream), ascent of the soul, cleaving to God, ecstatic enthusiasm, and equanimity, the revelation of Elijah, and even spells and the use of the holy names were widespread in all of the pietistic circles. These formed a conception of the world which acknowledged the power of visionary authority drawing upon contact with upper worlds. Further, this perception gave rise to charismatic sources of inspiration and venerated those who were endowed with it. Contemporary figures such as the *BESHT*, Rabbi Moses Hayim Luzzatto, the

<sup>51</sup> *Ma'aseh Ta'atu'im*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> See *Zohar* I, fol. 183a-184a, and cf. Y. Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, Jerusalem 1961, II, p. 128; R. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo* (n. 21, above), pp. 41, 182; R. Elijor, *Galya-Raza*, critical edition, *Mif'aley Mehqar shel Ha-Makhon le-Mada'ey ha-Yahadut*, series I, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 15-16.

Maggid of Mezhirech, or Rabbi Nathan Adler were viewed by the members of their circles as charismatic figures who transcended the normal bounds of conception and were in contact with upper realms which existed beyond the domain of the senses. The *BESHT* defined his spirituality as "like someone who conducts himself on a level above that of nature," and his disciple, the Maggid of Mezhirech said of him, "Why are you surprised that he had a revelation of Elijah and even achieved a very high spiritual ascension," whereas the *Hatam Sofer*, Rabbi Nathan's disciple, cites his teacher as saying: "when I have an ascent of the soul into the Garden of Eden I always see ..." In the Hasidic tradition Rabbi Nathan is described as the one of whom Rabbi Elimelekh said: "for many years such a holy soul as Rabbi Nathan Adler has not come into this world, except for our Teacher, Rabbi Israel the *Ba'al Shem*, of blessed memory."<sup>54</sup>

Paranormal phenomena are known to be interpreted according to the status of the individual to whom they are attributed, according to the religious significance inferred from them, and according to the cultural context of its time and place. Thus phenomena which are interpreted as manifestations of the holy spirit in a group which cultivates a mystical atmosphere, and which arouse an attitude of respect and awe there, can be viewed as a manifestation of confusion and deceit in another group, one which fears them and adopts an attitude of contempt and criticism against them. Even more so, the evaluation of these phenomena may depend upon whether they embody a threat to the existing order or whether they arouse opposition to the prevailing leadership. It seems then that this fear of the claim of unlimited authority on the part of the spiritually inspired, who were viewed by those around them as possessing the holy spirit, as well as fear of the new ritual expressions which were forged for spiritual and mystical purposes were the motivations behind the great majority of the writs of excommunication issued against the various Hasidic circles.

Suspicion, hostility, and criticism were aroused at the moment when contact with the upper worlds transcended the limits of the exalted individual or left the domain of an elite few acting with the community's consent. As the concerns of such a prophetic group became a phenomenon with social significance, the community responded belligerently. Dreams, which in Rabbi Nathan's circle were an expression of prophetic revelation and the inspiration of the holy spirit were, as noted, interpreted entirely differently by the

---

<sup>54</sup> See *Toldot Ya'aqov Yosef*, par. *Mishpatim*, fol. 56. See also *Magid Devarav le-Yakov*, Koretz 1781, introduction; *Derekh ha-Nesher*, p. 22; *Ohel Naftali*, sig., 127, pp. 45-46. See also Horowitz's statement that Rabbi Nathan was also venerated by his disciples as a miracle-worker, *Rabaney Frankfurt*, p. 156, and cf. the spiritual characterization of exalted spirits like him in Scholem, "Mizwah ha-Ba'ah be-'Averah," in: *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, pp. 19-20; German translation in id. *Judaica 5*, Frankfurt a. M. 1992, p. 7-116.

community leadership. Rabbi Nathan and his group were depicted as deceitful tricksters. Quite possibly, the common view that linked prophecy, revelation, and frightening dreams with the Sabbatian movement on the one hand, and which attributed visionary dreams and fraud to the Frankist circles on the other, led to excessive severity in judging the significance of dreams in Adler's circle.<sup>55</sup> In any event, it is certain that the close proximity of Jacob Frank, who stayed, as noted, in Offenbach during the late 1780s, and who was known for his dreams, prophetic visions, and manifestations of the holy spirit<sup>56</sup> which took place in his circle, could not encourage a sober, tolerant, or moderate assessment regarding the visionary revelations and prophetic dreams of Rabbi Nathan's circle.

We must then conclude that the various pietistic circles, possessing ascetic, mystical, and ecstatic tendencies, which were the subjects of the Kabbalistic-Hasidic tradition in Eastern and Western Europe during the 1770s and 1780s, were persecuted and excommunicated not because of what they actually were, but rather because of what their opponents deemed them to be in the light of the Sabbatian-Frankist threat which was then being renewed with unprecedented force. The lines of demarcation between the Kabbalistic, Hasidic, Sabbatian, and Frankist circles, all of which called themselves "Hasidim," became increasingly blurred in the consciousness of those who were observing from without. Their common elements, anchored in the Kabbalistic tradition and the pietistic-Hasidic ethos, were many, far outweighing the shadings which distinguished them. Hence, the leadership felt that it was proper to wield the weapon of excommunication against all spiritual separatism. Every tendency to spiritualistic autonomy transcending the authority of the community was banned, with no attempt to distinguish among the essential differences between those who were delving deeply into the mystical heritage and penetrating to the depths of the tradition and those who had passed beyond it and constructed a new spiritual world on its ruins.

The fate of Rabbi Nathan Adler, like the fate of the Hasidic members of his generation in Eastern Europe who viewed themselves as continuing the holy Kabbalistic tradition and as profound innovators under its inspiration and within its confines, was largely determined by the anarchic significance that was enhanced to it and by the antinomian use made of that tradition by Sabbatian and Frankist circles, who acted at the same time and in the same place in the name of the same Kabbalistic and Hasidic tradition.

---

<sup>55</sup> On prophecy, revelation, and nightmares which were bound up with the Sabbatian movement, cf. G. Scholem, "Ha-Tenu'ah ha-Shabtait," in: *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, pp. 78, 98.

<sup>56</sup> Frank's dreams are mentioned in *Divrey ha-Adon* in pars. 2145, 2201, and 2203 and in many other places. See Levine, p. 48, par. 37; p. 72, par. 72; p. 82, par. 93 et passim. Cf. "Zikhronot Dov Ber mi-Bolikhov," in: Brower, p. 216, and see Scholem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, p. 119.