

MISHIKAN

A FORUM ON THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

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Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement

The Herzl of Jewish Christianity

Kai Kjær-Hansen

Eerdmans/Handsel, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1995, 262 pp., paperback.

Reviewed by Gershon Nerel

The rise and decline of a unique Messianic Jewish congregation in Kishinev, Bessarabia, mainly between the years 1885-1937, called "Israelites of the New Covenant," is the central theme of this historical research. Around the personality, activities and memory of Joseph Rabinowitz (1837-1899), the founder of this congregation, Kai Kjær-Hansen vividly narrates and analyzes this phenomenon.

Although it started as a local congregation, the Kishinev group of modern Jewish disciples of Yeshua (Jesus) rapidly stimulated wide international interest and impact. Close personal connections were developed between its prominent leader, Rabinowitz, and the leadership of evangelical missionary organizations to the Jews, particularly in Germany, England, France, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. These relations, either by correspondence or personal visits, reached even the USA.

Following the death of Rabinowitz in 1899, his congregation dissolved for a period of about two decades, but was restarted by Lev Averbuch for a time between the years 1922-1937.

The narrative of this movement is depicted through the medium of the following five "circles" of activity, which reveal a large innovative network developing out of the Kishinev Messianic Jewish congregation:

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1. The constant aspirations of Rabinowitz and Averbuch to maintain their national Jewish identity, avoiding their assimilation into gentile churches. Besides using Hebrew and Yiddish in their liturgy, for example, they insisted on keeping Jewish holy days like the Sabbath and Passover, as well as circumcising their sons;
2. Their attempts to remain independent, as much as possible, in theological and organizational areas. For example, they made repeated efforts to redefine their doctrinal positions through Hebrew Biblical terms, without automatically adopting traditional church creeds;
3. Their need to balance heavy financial dependence upon support from abroad with their desire for theological and organizational independence;
4. Their strong awareness of and ambivalent attitudes (theological and practical) towards Eretz-Israel and the secular Zionist movement.
5. Their need to cope with the secular and ecclesiastical authorities in Kishinev, be it under the Russian-imperial regime, their Rumanian successors after 1918, or the representatives of the Greek Orthodox church.

From the first to the last page of the book the reader can sense the vitality and relevance of the Kishinev movement for the worldwide Messianic Jewish movement, which has significantly spread simultaneously in Europe, America and Israel in our generation.

Contribution to Modern Research

No one before Kai Kjær-Hansen has collected and scrutinized such a vast amount of diverse primary sources dealing with Rabinowitz and the Kishinev movement. This new body of primary documents which appears in almost a dozen languages is significant by itself. By raising numerous critical questions Kjær-Hansen also succeeds in providing many precise explanations for the movement, which he deduces from original sources. Thus, for example, he is able to correct — sometimes quite critically — the conclusions of historians like D. Rausch (p. 83), S. L. Tsitron (pp. 37; 91) and especially S.J. Zipperstein (pp. 50; 141; 159; 166; 193).

Through his skilled methodology, Kjær-Hansen allows the primary sources to speak for themselves, and thus his arguments and conclusions are more convincing — at least until such time as they may be refuted by other as yet unresearched sources. This critical approach, giving necessary place to the primary sources and presented in a panoramic framework, no doubt contributes to the narrative's credibility.

Another significant side to this research is the synthesis the author has made out of the diverse documents, thus presenting an updated picture of the Kishinev movement. For example, by relating to material recently published in the memoirs of Eric Gabe (pp. 71; 218), Kjær-Hansen also furnishes us with additional dimensions to the subject.

The "Herzl" of Jewish Christianity?

Following Hugh Schonfield (p. ix), Kjær-Hansen calls Rabinowitz the "Herzl" of Jewish Christianity. But would Rabinowitz himself have accepted without hesitation such a connection between himself and the leader par-excellence of secular Zionism? Reading about the attitude of Rabinowitz towards Herzl, to which Kjær-Hansen also refers (pp. 124-125), one may well question such a "titular" analogy between these two striking personalities. The very fact that they became spokesmen and leaders of two ideological streams need not place them in the same category. Thus, for example, although in 1896 Rabinowitz expressed vague ideas about moving his work to Jerusalem (pp. 195-196), he stated that Herzlian Zionism was "possessed by the spirit of Antichrist" (see: *Things to Come*, vol. iv, no.12, June 1898, p.141). For him, practically, earthly Zion was found in Kishinev — at least until the second advent of Yeshua (pp. 48; 182; 191; 194).

Perhaps, therefore, it would be better to describe Rabinowitz as the "Lawyer Apostle," a title already given to him in his own lifetime (p. 67), rather than linking him too closely with Theodore Herzl. Another possibility would be to refer to Rabinowitz simply as "The Herald of Modern Messianic Judaism." Further research on the attitudes of Rabinowitz towards Herzl and his own concept of Zionism — heavenly and earthly — would clarify this topic.

Similarities in Eretz-Israel

We may benefit and learn new lessons from drawing a comparison between the developments within the Kishinev congregation(s) and the developments in the Messianic movement in Eretz-Israel. The following points are significant:

a) Reading Kjær-Hansen's narrative, one cannot ignore or over-estimate the significance he gives to the use of the Hebrew language by Rabinowitz. Indeed, the "Kishinev Apostle" completely understood the importance of Hebrew being used in sermons, in composition of articles of faith and in liturgy (pp. 46-47; 107; 152). This language factor no doubt played an important role in shaping the theology of Rabinowitz, as it did later in the land of Israel, especially since the 1930's. The renaissance of the Hebrew language among Messianic Jewish circles still deserves further investigation in order to discover the unique Messianic Jewish contribution to the revival of modern Hebrew.

b) Kjær-Hansen carefully indicates the uncovered theological expectations of individual missionaries involved in the Kishinev movement (pp. 79; 84; 133-135; 165). We find a parallel phenomenon in the land of Israel in the last 70 years. On the one hand, Rabinowitz sought financial help abroad within the circles of the missionary societies, yet on the other he wanted full independence from them. This became more complicated when exemplified through the saying that "more than the new-born calf wanted to suck the milk, the mother-cow wished to nurse and provide the milk." This ambivalence of financial "give and take" existed in Kishinev no less than in the Land of Israel. Another problem which existed in Kishinev, which Kjær-Hansen correctly observes, was the rivalries and opposing approaches between the expatriate missionaries and the indigenous congregation (pp. 136-137; 140). Again this can also be traced in Eretz-Israel.

c) The administrative restrictions by the authorities raised similar difficulties in Eretz-Israel. The permission requested by Rabinowitz to baptize and administer the Lord's Supper or to officially conduct marriage ceremonies resembles the limitations of the Turkish "Millet" system imposed in Eretz-Israel. This system denied legal recognition to religious groups functioning outside the framework of the established churches and denominations. Yet, while in Kishinev this refusal to grant such permission to the congregation leadership contributed to the decline of the movement (p. 233), in Israel it gradually "lost its sting," inasmuch as in the Israeli reality such regulations were bypassed.

Too Much Expected Too Soon

From 1882, when Rabinowitz accepted Yeshua as personal Savior and Lord, until his death in 1899 only 17 years had passed. In such a short period Rabinowitz had accomplished what others would only accomplish in a significantly longer period of time. During these 17 years it seems that Joseph Rabinowitz had too high expectations of himself. Others abroad, like John Wilkinson and Franz Delitzsch, also had expected him to work unceasingly. Sometimes he felt he was under pressure to instantly adjust his doctrinal concepts to the dogmas of others (p. 108). In addition, the intensity of his writing and preaching activity, besides frequent travels abroad, and other obligations in Kishinev must have affected his spiritual discretion and decision-making process, as well as his physical health. Thus, for example, his attempts to crystallize his articles of faith in a very short period of time (1884-85) resulted in no less than four different texts, (pp. 92-103), which probably did not confuse only his friends.

Would it not, we may ask, have been wiser to get more experience by doing things more slowly step by step and thus ripening in theological reflection and organizational capacity? It seems to this reviewer that fewer high-pressure activities and demanding efforts put upon his shoulders would have produced a

greater spiritual and practical maturity. Nevertheless, Rabinowitz was still criticized for doing his work too "slowly" (p. 184)! In retrospect, we may draw a lesson from the Rabinowitz "no time to lose" overhasty experience. Adequate time is needed to gradually lay foundations which in a reasonable time will be able to bear the full weight of congregational life. To train leadership to share responsibility does need extensive time. Building institutional resources, besides spiritual personnel, is imperative in laying grounds for a cohesive and substantial infrastructure of any new congregation.

A Messianic Jewish "Microcosmic Model"

The Kishinev movement started by Joseph Rabinowitz still stands as a modern prototype of a new Messianic Jewish congregation. It needs to face the historical heritage of Church and Synagogue of the past 1900 years. In this book Kai Kjær-Hansen used his genuine sensitivity and scholarly capacities to present the problems that affect the growing Messianic Jewish movement, especially in the last century. Therefore, this book should not, and in fact it cannot, be read as if it were a historical novel. Adequate time is needed, not only for reading but also for fully digesting the contents of this serious book.

It should be noted that further unknown information about the Kishinev movement is still hidden among the pages of the organ of the Kishinev "second" congregation "Hamevaser Tov," published in the 1930's in Yiddish, Hebrew and Rumanian. Furthermore, it is recommended that in the next edition of the book a detailed subject-index be included.

The Kishinev congregation disintegrated, but the precedent it set still presents a special challenge to anyone who looks for historical perspective. Anyone who wishes to learn from the past — both from its positive and negative aspects — may find in this research a mine of thoughtful and illuminating material.