

The Deluge and The Mashiach 1648-9

Mid-17th century Poland was seen as the *Goldene Medinah* and was perceived as so special, that many had visions that the coming of the Mashiach was imminent and he would first come to Poland. All the turmoil in the world at that time was seen as ‘*chevlei mashiach*’, the birthpangs of the Messiah - suffering on the way to his coming. All around the Jewish world it had been predicted, based on the Zohar, and foretold by the Shelah HaKadosh and others, that in the year 5408, equivalent to the year 1648, the Mashiach would come.

“In this (Ha’zos = 1648) year of Jubilee ye shall return every man unto his possession”

Many saw only the glory of the Jewish position, but the Maharshah offered an insight into the Jewish situation and warned:

“The Jews in this time must not prosper too well in order to avoid becoming too proud, nor must they suffer too much punishment or they will vanish.”

As the 17th century unfolded it was blighted by the unfolding of anti-Jewish attacks as well as epidemics, famine, pillaging and raids and then in 1648-49 (Years of *Ta”ch v”Ta”t*) the Cossacks rebelled and Eastern Europe imploded. Bogdan Chmielnicki, the Ukrainian hero, attacked Polish nobility, clergy and, as Shavuot commenced, Jews as well.

The attacks were noted for their unspeakable cruelty, exterminating Poles and Jews alike.

“We are ashamed to write down all that the Cossacks and Tatars did unto the Jews, lest we disgrace the species Man who is created in the image of God”

Jews died and this period, The Deluge, was seen as the third greatest Jewish tragedy after the destruction of the two Temples. It is considered that up to 20% of Polish Jewry was murdered, between 30,000 and 100,000 people. Rabbi Nathan Nata Hanover in his *Yeven Metzulah (The Abyss of Despair)*:

“Many communities beyond the Dnieper and close to the battlefield, such as Pereyaslaw, Baryszowka, Piratyn, Boryspole, Lublin, Lachowce and their neighbours, who were unable to escape, perished al kiddush Hashem.”

Other Jews were sold into slavery or forcibly converted whilst many fled to Prussia, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Silesia and other places.

These horrific years were a watershed in Jewish history.

Public mourning took on new meaning, but no new fast day was to be instituted. In *Megillas Eifah* (Scroll of Terror) by Rabbi Shabbesai Katz there is an account of the Cossack massacre and the resulting fast day:

“Therefore I have ordained for myself and for the coming generations of my descendants a day of fasting, sorrow, mourning and lamentation on the 20th day of the month of Sivan...because on this day has been the beginning of persecution and pain...for the persecution of 4931 (1171 - Blood Libel in Blois) was on the same day.”

Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller (*the Tosafos Yom Tov*) lived in Krakow during The Deluge. He played a major role in the responses of the Jewish communities to the massacres. He was responsible for instigating the fast day, the freeing of *agunos* where husbands could not be found, writing *selichos* for the day and for stating there should be no new *kinos*. He was also credited with having popularised a *Mi-she-berach tefillah* as a special blessing for those who refrained from talking during *tefillah*, but also as a reaction to the massacres of 1648-9. Some people stated that the massacres were a divine punishment for talking during prayer!

Tefillos were instituted and expanded in recognition of the enormous tragedy that befell Polish Jewry. Private and communal mourning came together. *Yizkor* was sharply associated with Jewish suffering and had been recited, from the time of the Crusades in Germany, only on Yom Kippur. Gradually the custom of *Yizkor* spread eastward and into Poland. By the end of the 17th century Polish Jewry supplemented it with a prayer to remember the victims of 1648. They then extended its recital beyond Yom Kippur to the last day of the *Shalosh Regalim*, where it has remained ever since.

The *Va’ad Arba Aratzos* was financially crippled following the Chmielnicki massacres as war, disorder and anarchy gripped Poland which resulted in a flood of poor, homeless and refugee Jews.

Rabbinic influence declined. There was a loss of faith. Many with messianic fervour ‘believed’ in Shabbatai Zvi. The diary of Gluckel of Hameln showed the hope and despair of misguided messianism.

Out of the desperate straits of Polish Jewry would be born Chasidism.