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Rabbi, Mystic, or Impostor? The Eighteenth-Century Ba'al Shem of London

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Rabbi, Mystic, or Impostor? The Eighteenth-Century Ba'al Shem of London, Michal Oron, translated by Edward Levin (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2020) ISBN 978-1-904113-03-4, pp. xviii + 309, £39.50.

The colourful eighteenth-century Jewish mystic and magician, Samuel Falk, known as the Ba'al Shem (master of the [divine] name, wonderworker/magician) of London, has been the object of more than a century of research. Even so, as Yehuda Liebes put it in his thoughtful review of the original Hebrew edition of this book ("Diary of an Enigma", *Ha-Aretz*, 3 June 2003, <https://www.haaretz.com/life/books/1.4845072>, in Hebrew), Falk is still an enigma to scholarship. Studied long ago by such historians as Adolf Neubauer, Solomon Schechter, Hermann Adler, and Cecil Roth, among others, Falk has attracted primary attention in our own era from two historians with radically different perspectives and backgrounds, Michal Oron and Marsha Keith Schuchard.

The present volume is the English translation of Michal Oron's Hebrew book (*Mi-Ba'al Shed le-Ba'al Shem: Shmuel Falk, Ha-Ba'al Shem mi-London*), published by the Bialik Institute in 2002. When it first appeared, it made a major contribution to the subject in presenting two previously unpublished diaries of Falk himself and of his factotum Zevi Hirsch of Kalisz, along with several other Hebrew documents, especially the critical letter on Falk penned by Jacob Emden and Falk's recently discovered will. Oron devoted much effort to annotating these texts, and providing a general introduction presenting her own interpretation of the nature of Falk's character and activity.

Published eighteen years later, the English edition is virtually identical, although it has been shortened and partly abridged to conform to the needs of an English readership. In his aforementioned review, Yehuda Liebes aptly characterized the two diaries as

very intimate texts, not intended for publication, offering a detailed report of the Ba'al Shem's activities, day in and day out, over a lengthy period of time. Here we find life as he lived it: accounts of his meetings with people of different social classes, work accidents (explosions while undertaking alchemical experiments, mishaps that befell him during mystical outings in the forests), lists of books in his possession, remedies, recipes for cookies, complicated money matters (his assistant describes

him as exceedingly stingy), gambling (with which he made a mint while his assistant, needless to say, always lost at cards), bitter disputes in which he took part and even spats with his wife (on one occasion, over a kugel that turned out badly). Falk also records his dreams with astonishing openness, shedding light on his innermost desires and fears. In one dream, his servant steals all his property. In another, his wife jumps out of the window and breaks her neck. He dreams about his father, who abandoned him as a child, who now looks up to him as a philosopher, and about a close friend masturbating in his presence. . . . Most of all, however, the diaries describe Falk's magic. His assistant records the practical side, describing the rituals in all their bizarre detail, whereas Falk concentrates on the spiritual side – the verses and incantations.

Liebes's rich summary is one thing, ploughing through these private and obscure texts, which sometimes consist merely of lists of household objects, loans, pawns, lottery tickets, and books, is quite another. The Hebrew includes many foreign words, especially Yiddish, as well as some awkward phrases and grammatical mistakes, and despite Oron's extensive efforts, many passages remain incomprehensible. The problem is exacerbated when rendering these texts into accessible English. The translation was begun by the late David Louvish but completed by Edward Levin. Michal Oron did not take an active part in preparing this volume, so the primary burden fell on Levin and the managing editor of the Littman series, Connie Webber, who both contributed introductions to the volume, explaining the challenges the publication entailed and their occasional uncertainty in making difficult decisions about the translation. Determined to offer translations that are both faithful to the original and understandable to the uninitiated reader, Levin has also taken the liberty of shortening or adding to Oron's notes. Both Levin and Webber deserve much credit for taking on such responsibilities without the direct involvement of the author. Todd Endelman, the well-known historian of Anglo-Jewry, has also added a helpful new introduction.

Another obstacle in using this volume is that its scholarship is not up-to-date. As far as I can tell, there is hardly any reference to works on the subject published in the last two decades. I am referring not only to scholarly writing on the occult, freemasonry, Rosicrucians, Swedenborg, radical underground movements and secret societies, and the like, but to new research in the field of Jewish studies relevant to the ambience of Falk and his contemporaries. To name only a few, Pawel Maciejko (and several of his students) have contributed significantly to the study of

Sabbateanism in general and of Jonathan Eibeschutz and his son Wolf as well as his associate Moses David of Podhajce in particular, and to scholarship on Jacob Frank and Frankism. Others, such as J. H. Chajes, Agata Paluch, and Asaf Tamari, have worked on practical kabbalah, demonology, possession, magic, and healing in early modern Jewish cultures. Their work and that of others might have shed new light on some of the details in the texts Oron collected.

As they now appear to the English reader, the private diaries offer limited perspective on what Samuel Falk actually believed about himself and his life mission, and why, unlike most *ba'alei shem*, he seems to have acquired considerable fame and notoriety among Christians and Jews alike. His material success and the steady stream of visitors from all over Europe who were willing to pay him for his services while visiting his conspicuous “camp” on London Bridge surely singled him out as a fascinating mediating figure between the two faith communities. I need not recount here the full list of Christian nobles, such as Count George Rantzow and Baron Theodor von Neuhoff, as well as more infamous Christian celebrities, such as Count Alessandro Cagliostro and Giacomo Casanova, who offer ample evidence of their high regard “for the great prince and high priest of the Jews” (p. 29). One would think that such flattery by Christian notables might have repelled rabbis and other Jewish elites from entering into close contact with the mysterious Falk. But Moses David of Podhajce referred to him in messianic terms, and Sussman Shesnowzi, another credible Jewish witness, offered similar words of commendation. The powerful Boaz and Goldsmid families supported him, both materially and in other respects. While Falk resisted membership in a specific London congregation since he claimed to be “a *ba'al-ha-bayit* (master of the house) for the whole world” (p. 59), there appears to have been little Jewish resistance to his continual presence in London over several decades, nor does he appear to have incurred the wrath of many enemies. On the contrary, when he died, he seems to have been properly memorialized as a reputable Jew especially generous in his will in supporting multiple segments of the Jewish community both in London and in Fürth.

So how should Samuel Falk be remembered, and how can historians best evaluate him and his legacy? It is at this point that the extensive scholarship of Marsha Keith Schuchard should be mentioned. If one concludes that the mythical image of Falk – the occultist and alchemist, the alleged Jewish conduit to Christian radical movements and secret societies – is ultimately more significant than the mundane portrait of his everyday life revealed in

the diaries, it is to Schuchard's work that one is obliged to turn, if not to her ultimate conclusions, then at least to the provocative questions she has consistently raised. Schuchard has found little favour with some historians in the field, who have questioned her often unsubstantiated conclusions based on flimsy or circumstantial evidence, especially when speaking about Judaism and kabbalah. Endelman, for example, sees her work as the best-known of the fanciful and speculative accounts of Falk that have flooded the scholarly marketplace, pointing to her conclusions that Falk was a crypto-Sabbatian, a supporter of Stuart claims to the British throne, a radical freemason, and teacher of sexual kabbalah to Swedenborg, and more. He even evokes the authority of Pawel Maciejko, the expert on Sabbateanism and Frankism, who deems her imaginative rendering of a Jewish-Christian international network "more like a positive fantasy of modern enthusiasts of multi-culturalism than a historical reconstruction" (p. 9).

Some twenty years ago (in *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought*, published by Princeton University Press in 2000, pp. 161–9 and, on freemasonry, 150–53), I tried to offer my own tentative reflections on Falk in the context of eighteenth-century Anglo-Jewish thought, addressing the work of both Oron and Schuchard. I could not accept most of the details Schuchard presented regarding Falk as well as several of his Jewish contemporaries. I still maintain my initial scepticism regarding her observations, but I am unhappy with those who would dismiss her views out of hand or simply label her work a fantasy. Historians need to refute her, and challenge every mistake she supposedly makes, but they should appreciate the provocative questions she has posed and the extraordinary erudition she has displayed in her work on radical freemasonry, Blake, and Swedenborg. She claims no expertise in Jewish matters and Hebrew sources, but her powerful imagination should prod other historians to rethink and question some of their conventional assumptions.

To Oron's great credit, she takes Schuchard and her work seriously, relying on some of her suggestions while emphatically rejecting others. It is precisely the exchange between them, especially in the notes to her chapter "Samuel Falk and the Freemasons", that is most constructive. Our present state of research has not changed significantly since Oron wrote this chapter and Schuchard published her initial essays on Falk as an "Unknown Superior" of freemasonry. We do know that Falk was

deeply connected to Sabbateans of the Eibeschütz circle; that he had intimate contacts with freemasons, an affiliation shared by many Jewish intellectuals in London at the time, who enjoyed both the social and spiritual fellowship offered to them by cosmopolitan Christians; and that he might have been in close proximity to Swedenborg and his radical ideas as well. Oron strongly counters Schuchard's assumption of Falk's membership in a kind of Jewish-Christian religious network, maintaining that he lived and died as a Jew, and was buried with honour in a Jewish cemetery. If one were to tone down Schuchard's claim that Falk was the founder of a new hybrid religion, and suggest instead that he maintained close affiliations with Christians both personally and through masonic networks, without relinquishing his Jewish identity, the two interpretations would not necessarily contradict each other. What seems obvious to this reader is that both the scholarly works of Oron and Schuchard should be consulted and refined by future researchers, not only in sharpening their gaze on the Ba'al Shem of London, but also in unearthing more fully the intriguing, complex, and often hidden connections between Jewish and Christian radical ideas and movements in early modern Europe.

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