

Three Nuts Who Transformed the Jewish People
Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon
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Have you ever wondered why you are the way you are? Have you ever wondered why your body is the height that is, and the weight that it is, and the shape that it is? Have you ever wondered why your personality has the traits and predilections and quirks that it has?

I know I have. God, I often find myself wondering, You made a world with majestic mountains, powerful oceans, and beautifully sparkling skies – would it have all that hard to give me a quicker metabolism? Why do I have allergies? Couldn't I have been at least a little more athletic when I was a kid? And God, as I strive to do Your will as a rabbi, couldn't you have given me thicker hair to clip my yarmulke on to?

Why are we the way we are? It's a question that many of us ask all the time. I don't promise you any answers today, but I'd like to suggest what might be a new way to look at the question. Today I'd like to introduce you to three men from our Jewish past. Two of their lives overlapped in time, but they each lived in different places, and they each played very different roles in the histories of our people. They did, however, share one important trait in common, and in this shared trait, I think, we can find a path to self-understanding.

The first of these Jewish men was born on the Portuguese island of Madeira in 1604, and baptized under the name Manuel Dias Soeiro. Baptized? Yes – at the time, being Jewish in Portugal and elsewhere was a capital offense, and most European Jews, at least outwardly, had become practicing Christians. To be Jewish – even to be accused of being Jewish – was very dangerous.

As a result, when he was young, Manuel Diaz Soeiro's family fled to the relative safety of the Netherlands – Amsterdam. There, the Soeiros were able to practice their Judaism openly and far more safely than they had in Portugal, and Manuel was able to take on a Hebrew name, Menasseh Ben Israel.

Menasseh studied in Amsterdam's rabbinical academy, and as a young man he became known for his extraordinary scholarly abilities. And when the members of Amsterdam's Beth Jacob synagogue, the largest and most prestigious congregation in town, next needed a new rabbi, they chose Menasseh ben Israel. Not a bad gig for an 18-year-old.

He had an expansive knowledge Torah, Talmud, and other classical Jewish texts, and in time he became fluent in no fewer than ten languages – Hebrew, Latin, Portuguese, Dutch, and many others. He published dozens of books on a wide variety of topics, and attracted the attention of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Since Menasseh's salary at the synagogue, was quite spartan (as all rabbinic salaries are) he decided to supplement his income by becoming a printer on the side. He published many important Jewish tracts, and this only added to his growing reputation.

Among Menasseh's many friends was an up-and-coming young artist in Amsterdam by the name of Rembrandt van Rijn. Rembrandt illustrated some of Menasseh's books, and, in 1636, painted a portrait of him as well. The picture shows a smartly dressed young rabbi sporting a Vandyke beard, a white collar extending to the end of his shoulders, and a very wide-brimmed hat cocked jauntily on his head. He looks kind of like a pilgrim, but more stylish, and more Jewish.

Life was difficult for Jews in the 17th century, and when things get bad Jews tend to think about the Messiah – the individual who, our tradition suggests, will put an end to our suffering. Menasseh was no different. He, like others, began to think a lot about the Messiah; and he, like others, began to think that the Messiah would arrive soon.

One Jewish view says that God will send the Messiah only when all Jews return to the land of Israel. But another view disagrees. This other view reminds us that the biblical book of Daniel predicts that God will send the Messiah only when, "he succeeds in scattering the power of the holy people." According to this view, the Messiah will only come when Jews live, not only in Israel, but everywhere.

Most people had assumed that it would be a long time before Jews would live everywhere. At the time – during the 17th century – Tibet, for example, had very few Jews; at the time, in Oklahoma, there wasn't a synagogue to be found; and have you ever tried to find a good bagel in the Amazon rainforest? It was even harder then than it is now!

But then, in 1644, a traveler returned to Amsterdam from a journey to Brazil, and reported to Menasseh that, deep in the Amazon jungle, he didn't find a bagel, but he had encountered a tribe of Indians who were Jewish – descendants of the Tribe of Reuben, he said. They even knew the Shema! The news got Menasseh thinking. Might this be the time? Might this be the moment God had chosen? Might the Messiah be about to arrive? After all, Jews need to be everywhere for that to happen, and now that Jews had reached the Amazon, there was one less region to worry about – and a very large one at that.

He began to study matter more closely. During Menasseh's time, of course, there were many places where Jews were forbidden to live. As you know, we Jews have been expelled from some of the most magnificent countries in the world. But for the Messiah to come, Menasseh read in the ancient texts, Jews would even have to live "*b'k'tzeh ha-aretz*," at the end of the earth, or more literally, at the end of the land. They would have to live in "End-Land" – "England." (It works in Dutch, too.) There used to be Jews living in England, but they had gotten expelled back in 1290. When Shakespeare wrote about Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice," during the 1590s, he did so never having met a Jew!

By Menasseh's day there actually were a few Jews living in England. Outwardly, they were Christians, of course, but they gathered quietly together to celebrate Jewish holidays and Shabbat

in the privacy of their homes, and discreetly carried on their Jewish lives. Their presence there was an open secret.

He began to write about the topic, and finally, in 1655, Menasseh ben Israel decided that it was time to make this Messiah-thing happen. He moved to London, and began to lobby for the readmission of Jews into England. He schmoozed the idea around to British leaders, especially to Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector of England (like today's Prime Minister).

Cromwell was in favor of the idea. He knew that officially permitting Judaism in England would not only attract Jewish capital, and be a boon to the country's economy, but also that the best way to convert these Jews to Christianity would be to let them in. He convened a high level conference on the subject, which debated the question at length. But alas, the conference was inconclusive, and adjourned without having reached a decision.

By late 1657, after almost two grueling years of work, Menasseh ben Israel abandoned his quest, and returned to Holland, a broken and destitute man. The following year, at the age of 53, he died, never having seen his dream fulfilled.

And yet, within a couple of years, things did begin to change for England's Jews. The attention that Menasseh had garnered – the support that he had received from some of England's most prominent citizens, began to pay off. Right around the time that Menasseh returned to Holland, a few Jewish families got together and rented a home to use as a synagogue – quietly, but not in secret. Then, again quietly, they bought land for a cemetery. Then, they hired a rabbi. More and more of London's citizens began to show their faces at Jewish events, "outing" themselves as formerly secret Jews. And slowly, without any official action or policy, the readmission of Jews into England became an established and legal fact.

Menasseh ben Israel may not have brought the Messiah, but without ever seeing the fruits of his labors, he did succeed in reopening England to Jews. And it is the Jewish community of Great Britain who gave the world the likes of Benjamin Disraeli, the first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, and actors Daniel Radcliffe and Sasha Baron Cohen. Think about it! Without Menasseh ben Israel – no Harry Potter, no Borat!

At the time of Menasseh's death there was, in Turkey, another young rabbi – our second Jewish leader this morning – who in just a few short years would utterly transform the face of world Jewry. Nowadays, I can tell you his name – it was Shabbetai Tzvi. But late in his life and for decades afterward, the mere mention of his name could get a Jew excommunicated, beaten, or even killed.

Shabbetai Tzvi was born into an affluent family 1626. This was during the heyday of Jewish mysticism, an age for Jews and for others of amulets and elixirs and magic of all kinds. Rabbis often put themselves forward as masters of this magic – the men who could write the amulets, teach the incantations, and concoct their powerful potions for every need. Young Shabbetai, however, went further than his contemporaries. He taught his students that a new day was imminent, and that the time was soon coming when all of the strictures of Jewish law would no longer apply. It was time, he taught, to start behaving accordingly. Forbidden foods, he said, are

now kosher; festivals could happen not only at their prescribed dates, but at other times such as he declared; “Ladies,” he said, “don’t worry about the fact that adultery and other such behaviors are prohibited – now you can break those laws whenever you’d like...with me.”

Needless to say, his fellow rabbis in Turkey didn’t take too kindly to these teachings, and in the early 1660’s they excommunicated him. Eventually, Shabbetai ended up in Jerusalem, where, the rabbis didn’t like him very much either. But, seeing that he had a wealthy family, those rabbis did their Turkish colleagues one step better. They hired him as a fundraiser, and sent him to Cairo.

While he was there, another Jerusalem rabbi – a 19 or 20 year-old named Nathan of Gaza – had a vision. In it, he saw the Messiah arrive to redeem the world, and the Messiah was none other than, you guessed it, Shabbetai Tzvi – that weird eccentric then on a business trip in Egypt. “Get ready,” Nathan taught, “for the time of our redemption is near.” It was said that Nathan simply could look into a person’s eyes, and tell that person what he or she needed to do in order to get right with God to prepare for that glorious day.

Shabbetai, having heard that Nathan was stirring *something* up, and having heard that he could eventually return to Jerusalem, and when he visited Nathan, he received the good news. Can you imagine his response? “Moi? The Messiah? No! It couldn’t be.”

Yes, Nathan told him, he was indeed the Messiah. The two men parted, and each traveled the Jewish world to spread the word – the time of the Messiah had come.

The news spread like wildfire, and Jewish communities around the world, ready for something to make life easier, were thrown into a frenetic tizzy. Jews in Northern Europe began requesting safe sea-passage to the land of Israel. Jews in Yemen began talking about leaving for Israel, and the local non-Jews became so angry that they massacred several Jewish citizens. The bible predicts that when the Messiah comes, God will carry us on a cloud to the land of Israel. One night in Greece, a man tried to hop on board a cloud from the roof of his house, fell to the ground, and died.

Scholars believe that about 70% of the world’s Jews believed that Shabbetai truly was the Messiah. And with all of that swirling messianic fervor, most of the others chose not to protest very loudly.

Shabbetai traveled to Turkey, where many Jews sold off their property for a fraction of its value and followed him on his journey. Eventually, the Sultan heard that a Jew claiming to be the Messiah was traveling through the land with several thousand followers. The Sultan had Shabbetai imprisoned. He could have had Shabbetai executed, of course, but he remembered that the last time a Jewish guy with messianic pretensions was executed, we ended up with Christianity.

So, to avoid turning Shabbetai into a martyred Messiah, the Sultan eventually gave him an ultimatum – either convert to Islam, or I’ll have to kill you.

Whereupon, the great Jewish Messiah, without much hesitation at all, promptly converted to Islam.

In response, most Jews immediately saw Shabbetai for the charlatan that he was, and tried to resume their regular lives. Others, however, continued to believe in him. After all, they argued, the bible says that the Messiah will be God's suffering servant, and look how much this messiah needs to suffer – he actually had to convert to another religion. Some of those believers remained Jewish; others converted to Islam along with their messiah. In fact, in Turkey and in Greece today, there remain a few small communities calling themselves “Donmeh,” “converts.” These are people who outwardly practice Islam, but secretly maintain their belief that Shabbetai Tzvi was the Messiah.

For our third individual, we jump ahead a few centuries, where we meet a young journalist from Vienna. While in Paris covering the trial of a French army officer falsely accused of treason named Alfred Dreyfus, hearing the crowds of supposedly enlightened Frenchmen outside the courthouse chanting “Death to the Jews,” this young reporter came to an important realization. “It's never going to work,” he thought. “The nations of the world said they would welcome us into secular society, but they never really meant it. Jews were never going to make it in Europe or in any non-Jewish nation, for that matter, for the non-Jews would never allow it.” Exhibit A was what was happening outside the courthouse; Exhibit B was what was happening inside.

That reporter was a dashing young man named Theodore Herzl. Herzl was born in Budapest in 1860, and by the 1890's had become a popular reporter in Vienna. He was Jewish, but completely unobservant and completely assimilated.

Outside the courthouse, however, he had something of a Jewish awakening. He realized that what Jews needed now was a country of their own – a place where we could live together in safety and in freedom, charting the course of our own destiny rather than allowing others to do it for us. Hence the name of his first book: *Der Judenstaat*, the State for the Jews.

At the time, the Zionist movement – the effort to rebuild a Jewish state in what was then called Palestine – already existed, but nobody paid it much attention. But Herzl put Zionism on the map. He began meeting with world leaders – the Sultan of Turkey, high-ranking British officials, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, the Pope, and others – trying to get support for his cause. His logic was impeccable: Effectively, he said, “Look, let's not mince any words. We know that you hate your Jews; you know that you hate your Jews; so we're going to make you an offer you can't refuse. All you need to do is help us set up our own little country in Palestine, and we'll take your Jews off your hands for you – they'll move to the Jewish state!”

He also traveled the Jewish world, going to Jewish communities large and small throughout Europe. And his dream lit them on fire. Herzl was a dashing man – he had a thick, well-trimmed beard, dark blazing eyes, and, he wore top-hat and tails, and hardly anyone could avoid being swept away by the force of his presence.

Remember, according to Judaism, the Messiah is going to return the Jews to the land of Israel and make everything good once again. And when Herzl came to town, many Jews felt that they had just met the Messiah himself.

In 1904, at the age of 44, Theodore Herzl died in of heart failure, never having seen his dream of a Jewish state fulfilled. People had accused him of being an unrealistic dreamer, but he had said, “If you will it, “it is no dream.” In 1898, he had written that, even though people might be laughing at his dream of a Jewish state, “in five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty, everyone will perceive it.”

And in fifty years later, 1948, one of the very first acts of the newly-formed State of Israel, was to move the remains of Theodore Herzl from their burial place in Europe and reinter them at Mt. Herzl National Cemetery, in Jerusalem.

Three men – Menasseh ben Israel, who without even knowing it was able to legalize Jewish residency in End-land, England; Shabbetai Tzvi, who gave Jews everywhere hope for a better day, only to dash those hopes in a moment of abject betrayal; and Theodore Herzl, who gave real hope to our nation, and played a crucial role in the process culminating in the creation of the modern State of Israel.

You’ll recall that I said earlier that all three of these men share an important trait. What was it? Well, they were all charismatic, that’s true. And they all wanted to help transform life for their people – that’s true, too. But the trait that I was thinking of is perhaps even more fundamental.

All three of these men were nuts.

Now, when I say that they’re nuts, I don’t mean that they were hopelessly idealistic, dreaming impossible dreams and working against all odds to fulfill them. No, what I mean is that all three of them suffered from crushing mental illness. Had they lived today, they all would probably have been under intense psychiatric care, medicated, and perhaps even institutionalized. And all three would have received the same general diagnosis – it used to be called manic-depression; psychiatrists now call it bipolar disorder.

As you may know, people who suffer from bipolar disorder have wide mood swings – manic times, during which they have boundless energy, sometimes feeling elation and euphoria, and sometimes severe anxiety; and periods of deep, dark depression. And it’s interesting to note that one symptom of bipolar disorder is that during manic times, sufferers can have delusions of grandeur, feeling that they are God’s chosen one, or on a special, sacred mission.

Shabbetai Tzvi, for example suffered bouts of horrible, debilitating depression, often not coming out of his room for days on end. And then, he would also have...other times – the times of what his students called “illumination.” He would step into a room, and his face, they said, would be radiant. His singing voice was beautiful, and melodious; he would engage in ecstatic religious rituals; he could teach for days on end, without stopping.

Menasseh Ben Israel would brood for months at a time, only to emerge with frenetic and boundless energy. He seemed unstoppable to himself and to others, able to do no less than set up the world stage for the advent of the Messiah.

Theodore Herzl suffered from depression, too, as did his wife and children. But when he wasn't depressed, Herzl could dream dreams like nobody else. He imagined himself riding a white horse at the head of a column, leading all of the world's Jews back to their ancestral homeland.

It's important to remember that all three of these men inspired Jews with their visions. They were all charismatic, they all dreamed great dreams; they all gave light to Jews during times of darkness. Shabbetai Tzvi and Theodore Herzl inspired thousands of Jews to leave everything they knew behind, and embark on dangerous journeys to places they'd only heard about, simply on the strength of their bright visions.

The visions of Menasseh and Herzl were good visions, of course – of Jews living freely in lands then forbidden to them, or even in the land of their ancestors. And for that matter, in a perverse, harmful way, Shabbetai Tzvi's messianic vision in some ways was a good one, too. But all of the visions were inspired, at least in part, by the illness that plagued them all.

So what are we to learn from all of this – what lessons can we take away from the lives of these three inspirational, transformative madmen. I learn several things:

1. *Beware charisma.* The more frenetic a person's following, the less rooted it tends to be in logic. Sometimes, as in the case of Theodore Herzl, this can ultimately come to good ends, but there are no guarantees, and we should look to one individual in the hope that he or she will save us only with great caution.
2. *Beware sanity, too.* Without these madmen, we might not have had the State of Israel today, and Great Britain might have been closed to our people for many more years. Some historians trace a direct line between Shabbetai's revolution in the 1600s and another revolution in the 1800's called Reform Judaism. In some ways, the demons that plagued all of these men ended up being transformative angels for the Jewish people today.
3. *The important question is not whether we're crazy - we're all at least a little crazy, of course. The important question is this: Crazy or sane, what are you going to make of that of the you that you are?* Menasseh ben Israel and Theodore Herzl remind us that that which causes us the most pain can be our greatest legacy to the world. It was their demons that led to their great accomplishments. And Shabbetai Tzvi reminds us that those same demons can really mess things up, too. The real question should not be whether we are perfect. The real question should be that of what the lasting impact of those imperfections will be.
4. *We can never fully control what the lasting legacy of our lives will be, but we can certainly try.* And Judaism teaches that there are three ways to try. As we read earlier, we don't know what the future holds for us – our prayers this morning detailed all kinds of horrible things that can happen. Be we also read that *tefillah, tzedakah, u'teshuvah* – prayer, repentance, and charity – can temper the severity of whatever happens. Prayer – reaching up to God, beyond ourselves, in humility and honest supplication. Charity –

reaching out to others, in kindness and with generosity. Repentance – reaching deep within ourselves to find the best selves that we can be. These three great tasks, these three holy endeavors, these three monumental and noble acts – prayer, repentance, and charity – these alone can chart the course of our destiny toward greatness regardless of who we are and regardless of the way God made us.

I wonder why I am the way I am all the time – height, weight, metabolism, temperament and all the rest – and sometimes I can even discern glimmers of the answers. But, if I'm really asking a question about the past – about why God made me turn out this way – I don't know whether the answer really matters. Maybe the more important question is what I can do to make the me that I'm stuck with serve as a force for the good. Are my imperfections going to destroy lives, like Shabbetai's did, or are they going to change things for the better, like Herzl's and Menasseh ben Israel's did? And what will I do to make sure that it turns out this way.

Remember, God made each of us as we are for a reason. The problem is that it's not always obvious what that reason is. Maybe that's the job God left for us.

May this year be a year of growth, of self discovery, and of transformation for you, for your loved ones, and for us all.

Shanah Tovah