

BOOK REVIEW

Seeking Zion—Modernity and Messianic Activism in the Writings of Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer

by JODY MYERS

(Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003)

Reviewed by
Asaf Yedidya

One of the most interesting characters in 19th century Orthodoxy, Rabbi Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer, is now gaining renewed interest. Kalischer's famous book *Seeking Zion*, first published in 1862, was recently reissued in a comprehensive edition by Judah Etsyon of Ofra. Etsyon sees himself and his fellow members of the Religious-Zionist movement as Kalischer's followers. The publication of Kalischer's book was destined to serve as a gesture to their great guide, and to propagate his ideology.

Jody Myers' important study about Kalischer, entitled *Seeking Zion—Modernity and Messianic Activism in the Writings of Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer*, constitutes the most comprehensive essay written about Kalischer to date. The author set out in front of the readers a wide perspective of Kalischer's thought. In order to accomplish this, she utilizes almost all of Kalischer's numerous writings. In addition, she was able to correct some of the mistakes made by others who researched Kalischer.

The author succeeded to accomplish her two objectives: first, to present and critically analyze the principles of Kalischer's messianic ideology in the context of Jewish intellectual history; and second, to illustrate the way that he presented his ideas to appeal to certain types of modern Jews.

She properly analyzed that which characterizes Kalischer's thought:

The net effect of Kalischer's revisions was a messianic ideology that was more modern than the prevailing one: it was more humanistic, and it comported more closely with a purely rational approach to history (68).

Additionally, her use of the term "realistic messianism" is of utmost importance. There are two pioneering elements fused together in Kalischer's thought: a new interpretation of the religious sources about the redemption, and an emphasis on realism.

TRADITION

A New Interpretation of Biblical Texts. Kalischer's readings of traditional texts served as the conceptual foundation for his plans. According to his interpretation, the first stage of redemption, described by the prophets, would not come about by miracle, nor, as commonly supposed, due to the mass repentance of the Jewish people. Rather, the process of redemption would begin only through human endeavor—active efforts made by the Jews to leave exile, and by their readiness to return to the Land of Israel. The renewal of sacrificial worship was the last phase of *ge'ulat ha-arets*.

An Emphasis on Realism. Kalischer, keenly aware of recent historical processes, attempted to interweave within his idea of Jewish nationalism both Jewish tradition and the current historical reality. Thus he recognized the historical turning points in the 19th century allowing for the Jews to actualize their national dream: the relatively tolerant regime of Muhammad Ali (1832-1840); the Emancipation, which legally permitted Jews to be active for their national interests, allowed Jews to advance in non-Jewish society both financially and politically and gain influential posts, which would help implement Jewish national plans; rising interest in the Land of Israel on the part of Christian European countries after the Crimean War; and the stirrings of nationalism in Europe. He related to the historical turning points in the 19th century, as well as contemporary hidden miracles of God, as signals to the Jews to act.

But, in my opinion, Myers focused on Kalischer's nationalist and messianic ideology, and did not value his orthodox-religious ideology, and the strong connection between both of them. For example, she states that,

it is clear, then, that Kalischer did not develop his messianic scheme as an antidote to assimilation or as a response to upwardly mobile Jews supportive of the reform movement. These phenomena were not evident in his world in 1836 (81).

This presentation is problematic. Three years after 1836, Kalischer started to publish articles that dealt with the Reform movement. Furthermore, in his late writings, he continually suggests that his practical program is an antidote to assimilation¹ or a response to upwardly mobile Jews supportive of the Reform movement.²

We know that Kalischer argued against practical changes to Judaism proposed by the Reform movement, and, on a social level, he offered ways to combat the attempts of the Reform movement to influence various communities, including his own. He considered it a crucial role of

Book Review

Orthodoxy to protect what he called the “mainstream population” against the influences of the Reform movement.

This outlook was based on a theory developed by Kalischer on the hierarchical structure of the Jewish community. Within this theory, Kalischer defines the boundaries of Jewish identity according to adherence to certain criteria, such as circumcision, and other signs of Jewish nationality such as Jewish solidarity, and the anticipation of the return of the Jews to Zion. According to this theory, only those who uphold these criteria of Jewish identity can be considered part of the Jewish community. At the top of the hierarchy of the Jewish community is the Orthodox population, which preserves Jewish identity through tradition. Beneath them is the mainstream population, which disobeys certain Jewish commandments, but not due to ideological reasons. The Reform population, which disobeys Jewish commandments on ideological grounds and deletes prayers for the return of the Jews to Zion, can be found at the bottom of the hierarchy. Kalischer’s theory maintains that while the mainstream population remains within the boundaries of the Jewish community, the Reform movement is to be segregated, and its influence upon the mainstream population must be combated.

Based on historical changes and subsequent crises in Jewish society during the 19th century, Kalischer felt that developing nationalistic ideologies within Judaism could solve many conflicts of his time. The Emancipation caused many Jews to adopt the national values of their country, while abandoning their Jewish national identities. The Reform movement extinguished hope and anticipation for the return of Jews to Zion and the building of the Holy Temple. The Orthodox community, while separating itself from the rest of the Jewish community, rejected any practical changes, including attempts to fulfill the prophecy of the return to Zion. Kalischer believed that developing nationalistic ideologies could both put a stop to the isolationist tendencies of the Orthodox community, and provide an alternative to the large population dissatisfied with traditional Judaism. Kalischer was sandwiched between the ultra-Orthodox mantra “*badash assur min ha-Torah*,” and the liberal movement, which advocated religious reform and cultural assimilation, and renounced most nationalistic tenets in Judaism.

Kalischer also proposed the idea of reinstating the Temple sacrifices, in this framework. He believed that in order for the Jewish people to fulfill their destiny as a chosen nation and spread the teachings of the Torah throughout the world, they must live as a nation according to the teachings of the Torah. This includes settling in the Land of Israel and fulfill-

TRADITION

ment of all the related statutes. This comprehensive level of worship (*shelemut ha-avoda*) is the peak of the redemptive process.³

Myers also deals with Kalischer as a manipulator, who conceals and exposes ideas and arguments according to necessity. She doubts his sincerity, unjustly, in my opinion.

For example, Myers states that after 1860, “Concealing his concern for the sacrifices clearly was a conscious strategy . . . to cater for public opinion. . . .” (164). But Kalischer himself exposed the reason for this “concealment.” He wrote explicitly in the end of his book *Seeking Zion* that the time to rebuild the altar had not yet arrived, since the Turkish Sultan does not approve of the activity.⁴

Another example is Myers’ claim that

Kalischer’s activism was driven by messianic motives, but he crafted arguments on behalf of the agricultural communes that emphasized their contribution to Jewish social, economic, and religious life (195),

and that,

he was only interested in social welfare projects that would hasten redemption. Jews engaged in agricultural work in Palestine served this end, but similar work in the Diaspora hindered redemption (202).

But, in truth, Kalischer agreed with Levinson’s (Ribal) moral arguments about the value of the agricultural work, and complimented the agricultural communes of Jews in Europe (Poland and Romania).⁵

Both Myers and Etsyon recognize the relevance of Kalischer’s thought, each in their own way. This fact, 130 years after Kalischer’s death, teaches something about the vitality of his ideology, among other important ideologies in the 19th century.

NOTES

1. See Meir Hildesheimer, “Rabbi Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch”, in *Sefer Aviad*, ed. Yitshak Repha’el (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1986), p. 203.
2. See Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer, *ha-Ketavim ha-tsiyoniyim shel Tsevi Kalisher*, ed. Israel Klausner (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1947), pp. 300-301; 304.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

ASAF YEDIDYA is a doctoral candidate in Jewish History at Bar Ilan University