

The Era of False Messiahs

Messianic agitation was widespread among Spanish Jews even before the expulsion, and it certainly grew stronger in its aftermath. In the sixteenth century many kabbalists, among them Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi and Solomon Molkho, became obsessed with eschatological themes. With the approach of the year 5335 (1574 of the Christian Era), the Jewish world witnessed a new upsurge of messianic fervor. Some regarded Isaac Luria, the great Safed kabbalist, as the Messiah; while Hayyim Vital, Luria's disciple, preferred to see himself as the hero of a messianic drama. Eschatological tension apparently abated somewhat in the first half of the seventeenth century, but in the second half of that century expectations for imminent redemption seemed to reach a new peak.

Several historical developments account for this renewed wave of messianism: the intensification of eschatological tension among certain radical Protestant groups in Europe, particularly in Holland and England; the massacres of 1648–1649 which destroyed hundreds of communities in Poland and the Ukraine; recent memories of Solomon Molkho's messianic activity; and finally, the diffusion of kabbalist literature which was permeated with calculations for the End of Days.

Yet even within this context, the momentous success of Shabbateanism was a remarkable phenomenon. Born in Smyrna (Ismir), Shabbetai Zevi moved to Jerusalem, then to Gaza where he met with an adept of Lurianic Kabbalah – Nathan Ashkenazi, called Nathan of Gaza. Nathan, receiving a revelation about the messianic role of his companion, became the prophet of the new Messiah. The terminology he used was derived from Lurianic Kabbalah as well as from concepts of popular Jewish messianism. Although Shabbetai Zevi himself studied other kabbalistic trends and was averse to Lurianic theosophy, this did not affect the enormous success of Nathan's propaganda. Within a very short time its impact was felt throughout the diaspora in processions of joy, acts of extreme mortification, and innumerable delegations who came to behold the Messiah.

This messianic agitation soon alarmed the Ottoman authorities. Summoned to appear before the sultan, Shabbetai Zevi was given a choice of apostasy or death. To the amazement of all his believers, the Messiah converted to Islam. His prophet Nathan immediately came up with an audacious kabbalist explanation: the Messiah has descended into the depths of the *kelippah* – the realm of evil – to conquer it from within. And so strong was the aspiration for redemption that neither the apostasy nor

the death of Shabbetai Zevi destroyed the belief of his followers. Among them we may distinguish two radical currents. In Greece the sect of the Doenmeh (Turkish for “converts” or “apostates”) professed Islam in public but adhered to a mixture of traditional and heretical Judaism in secret, believing in the divinity of Shabbetai Zevi and practicing sexual license. This sect survived in Greece till 1924 and then moved to Turkey.

In eighteenth-century Europe a last burst of Shabbateanism occurred with the appearance of Jacob Frank, a former disciple of Shabbetai Zevi who came under the influence of radical Shabbatean trends in the Balkans. Frank declared himself to be an incarnation of divinity and the successor of the Messiah from Smyrna. Frankism advocated outward adherence to Catholicism while secretly believing in a nihilistic version of heretical Judaism. Spreading from Poland to central Europe, the influence of the Frankists persisted well into the nineteenth century.

Shabbateanism in its various forms weighed heavily on the Jewish conscience. Its immense success could be attributed partly to the phenomenon of marranism. Communities of Jews who had been forcibly

converted and returned to Judaism, without fully assimilating its rigid normative system, were naturally more inclined to accept the antinomian tendencies of Shabbatean messianism. Another factor was the great social and intellectual mobility which facilitated the rapid transmission of ideas. The general crisis of the mid-seventeenth century also precipitated a great wave of millenarianism in Europe, and Shabbateanism was the Jewish expression of this general outburst.



1. Shabbetai Zevi "King of the Jews," by Ioannes Meyfensens. Engraving, 17th century.

Shabbetai Zevi proclaims himself the Messiah

1665

Shabbetai Zevi's apostasy

1666

Shabbetai Zevi's death

1676



2. Solomon Molkho's banner. Italy (?), before 1628.

1626: Birth of Shabbetai Zevi in Smyrna. His father Mordecai was born in the Peloponnesus to a family of Ashkenazi origin; first a small merchant, he later became a commercial agent for western traders, benefitting from the economic rise of Smyrna. Exceptionally talented, young Shabbetai seemed destined to become a member of the rabbinical elite.

1642–1662: Shabbetai Zevi's years of kabbalistic studies, revelations, "strange acts" (contrary to religious law), and travels throughout the European regions of the Ottoman Empire.

1648–1649: Chmielnicki's massacres in the Ukraine.

1665: Shabbetai Zevi's meeting in Gaza with Nathan Ashkenazi; the latter has a revelation concerning Shabbetai's messianic vocation; Shabbetai is persuaded to proclaim himself the Messiah and begins to cultivate majestic pomp. Nathan begins spreading the tidings of imminent redemption and calling for repentance. Returning to Smyrna, Shabbetai

arouses messianic enthusiasm in many Jewish communities. Arrested by the grand vizier, he is imprisoned in Gallipoli.

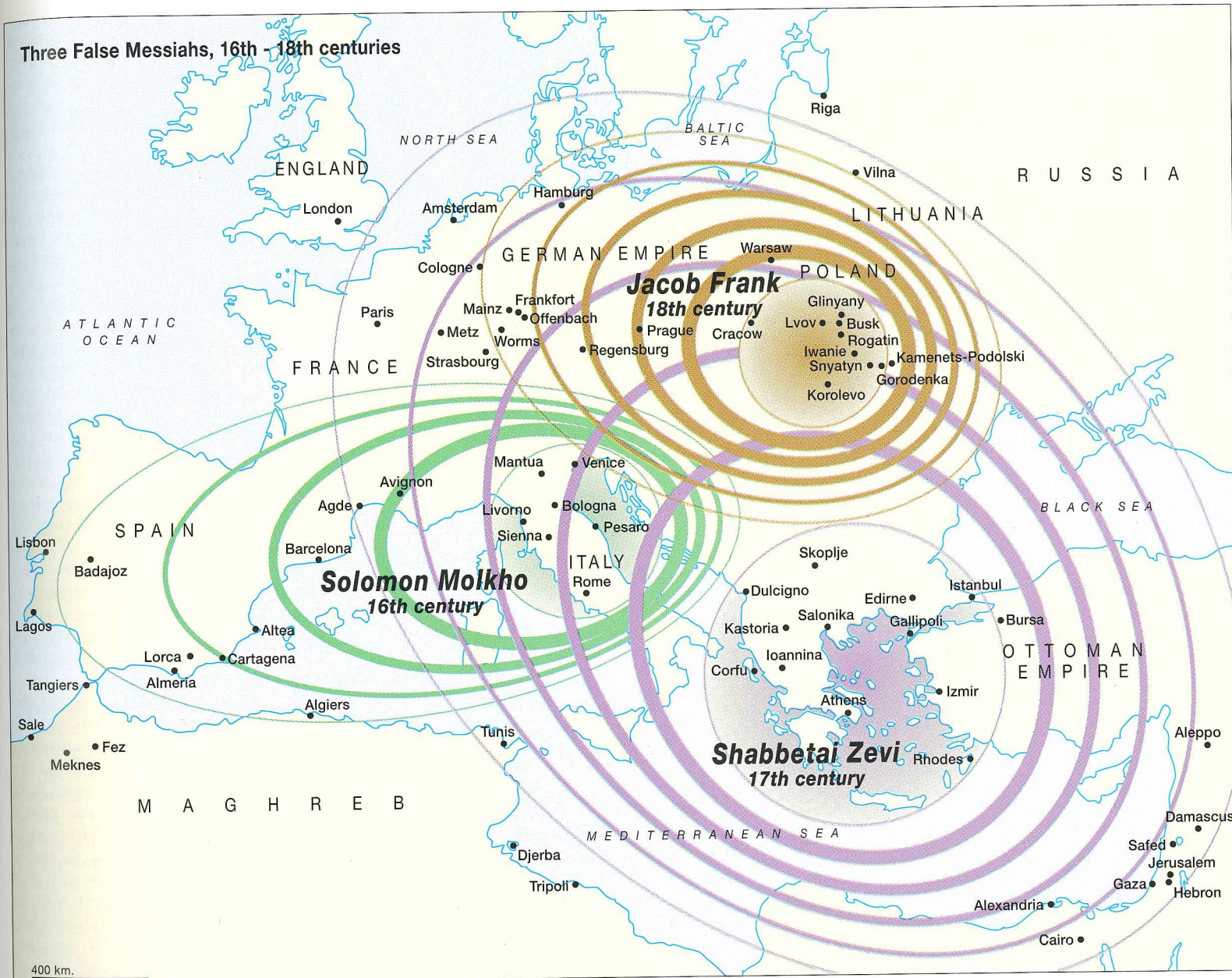
1666: After a disputation with a Polish kabbalist Nehemiah ha-Kohen, Shabbetai Zevi is accused of fomenting sedition among the Jews. Brought before Sultan Mehmed IV, he denies ever making messianic claims and accepts conversion to Islam in order to escape execution. Together with Shabbetai (now called Aziz Mehmed Effendi), his wife and dozens of his disciples convert as well.

1673–1676: Deported to Dulcigno in Albania following a denunciation, the false messiah dies on the Day of Atonement.

1680–1700: Period of intense Shabbatean agitation in northern Italy; missionary activities of Abraham Miguel Cardozo, one of the principal leaders of the movement.

c. 1700: Emergence of the radical current within the Doenmeh movement led by Baruchiah Russo (Osman Baba), who abolishes many biblical prohibitions, presenting them as contrary to the new

17th–18th Centuries



The Emden-Eybeschuetz disputation

Conversion of Jacob Frank

1750–1764

1757



3. Nathan of Gaza leads his people to the Promised Land. Engraving, Germany, 1666.

spiritual message of the Messiah.

1700: Led by Judah Hasid and Hayyim ben Solomon Malakh ("Angel"), Shabbatean groups from Poland "ascend" to the Land of Israel.

1700–1760: Shabbateanism is spread in central Europe and in northern Italy by several "prophets" and "believers" such as Judah Leib Prossnitz, Meir Eisenstadt, Nehemiah Hayon, Jonathan Eybeschuetz and his son Wolf Jacob Koppel, and Moses Hayyim Luzzatto and his circle. The same years witness the appearance of anti-Shabbatean literature, notably the writings of Jacob Emden who violently attacks Eybeschuetz.

1726–1791: Life of Jacob Frank, Shabbetai Zevi's greatest successor.

1759: Founding of a Frankist sect in Iwannie, Podolia (the Ukraine).



4. "Christian-Jew-Ishmaelite (Muslim)": an anti-Frankist caricature in Sefer Shimmush by Jacob Emden. Altona, 1758–1762.

“Pietists” and “Opponents”

In the eighteenth century East European Jewry witnessed a great religious awakening. The upheaval following the collapse of the Shabbatean movement, the spread of kabbalistic mysticism among the scholars, as well as popular traditions of mass enthusiasm, provided the background for the emergence of a new spiritual movement: Hasidism (from *hasidut*, meaning “piety”).

The father of Hasidism was a rabbi from Podolia in southeast Poland – Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (c. 1700–1760). A miracle-worker and a healer, an ecstatic mystic and a charismatic leader, the man drew followers and admirers from among kabbalists, rabbis, and leaders of groups devoted to occult studies. His religious teachings concerning the best methods to avoid sinful “undesirable” thoughts attracted all manner of rabbis and

the small community into a real movement. Within a few decades, Eastern Europe was dotted with hundreds of Hasidic communities.

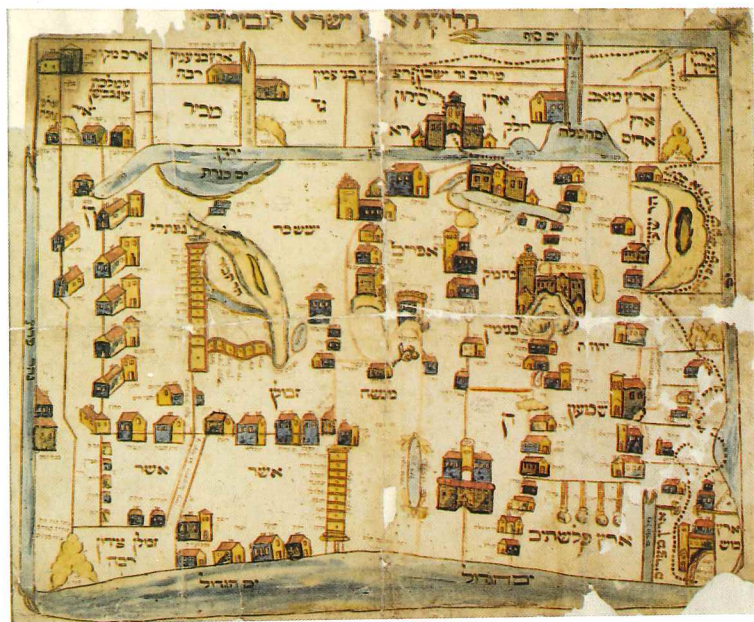
The disciples of Dov Baer, the *Maggid* (“preacher”), became leaders of these groups. In a complex process of decentralization, the movement split into numerous currents, each adhering to its particular doctrine, ritual, and organization. Certain elements, however, were common to all the various groups: belief in the supernatural powers of the leader (the *Zaddik*, the “righteous,” or the *Rebbe* in the affectionate and respectful meaning which the *Hasidim* gave to that title), and the conviction that he had direct links with the divine world.

The movement began to spread precisely while Poland was undergoing the tribulations of partition; but the new political frontiers, although separating the Jews of the Ukraine from their brethren in Lithuania and central Poland, did not prevent the advance of Hasidism. Moreover, it soon emerged as a cohesive force, unifying traditional Judaism and ensuring its survival in difficult times, when the absolutist princes were beginning to curb Jewish autonomy and to interfere in community affairs. Congregated around the *Zaddik*, the Hasidic community, although lacking official authority, offered an alternative to the former corporation and also constituted a bastion against Western influences which were beginning to threaten orthodox Jewry.

From its very early stages, however, the movement encountered internal opposition: at least part of the traditional rabbinic elite regarded the Hasidic enthusiasts as dangerous innovators. At the head of these *Mitnaggedim* (“Opponents”) stood a great Lithuanian scholar, Elijah of Vilna (the “*Gaon* of Vilna,” 1720–1797). The battle was waged with great ardor and knew no restraints. There were mutual excommunications and even denunciations to the authorities. A veritable war of religion developed in Vilna itself, each party trying to obtain the support of the rulers. After the death of the *Gaon*, the feud abated. The rival brethren eventually resigned themselves to each other’s existence; after all, a common enemy was appearing on the horizon: the European *Haskalah*.

While Hasidism was spreading in central Poland, crossing the Carpathian Mountains into Hungary and reaching as far as Palestine itself, the arduous labors of talmudic scholarship continued uninterrupted in Lithuania. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this very old tradition produced a new socio-religious phenomenon which was to some extent a positive reaction to the brilliant success of Hasidism: the “Moral” (*Musar*) movement, combining strict ethical behavior with an intensive study of the *Halakhah*.

Hasidism, Lithuanian scholarship, and the *Musar* movement were all manifestations of a vigorous religious revival which checked the growing influence of the *Haskalah* and eventually became the pivot of resistance of a traditional society to the challenge of modernity.



1. The Land of Israel divided into tribes. Map attributed to the “Gaon of Vilna,” c. 1802.

scholars from the elite of Jewish society. At the beginning of the 1730s he settled in Medzibozh, in Podolia, where he headed a community of disciples, some of whom were to become in their turn leaders of small mystical groups.

After his death in 1760 he was succeeded by Dov Baer of Mezhirech (1704–1772), who spread the teachings of the master and transformed

The Ba’al Shem Tov

c. 1700–1760



c. 1736: Israel Ba’al Shem Tov is revealed as a *zaddik* (“righteous man”) and settles in the town of Medzibozh.

1760: Death of the Ba’al Shem Tov; Dov Baer of Mezhirech, the *maggid* (“preacher”) succeeds him as leader of the movement.

1772: First partition of Poland. Death of the *Maggid*. In Vilna, then in Brody, the first pronouncements against the *Hasidim* are made; a violent anti-Hasidic pamphlet provokes a wave of persecutions against the movement’s adherents, mostly in Lithuania. Pinhas Horowitz, the *Maggid*’s disciple, settles in Frankfort – he is the first Hasidic leader to cross into Germany and serve there as a rabbi.

1773: Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Minsk settles in Vitebsk and propagates Hasidism throughout Belorussia.

1777: Dozens of *Hasidim* led by Menahem Mendel leave for Palestine.

2. The seat of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1811).

The birth of the Habad movement

1788



3. Box of Shemiroth, coins offered to the *zaddik* to his disciples as good-luck charms. Austria, 19th–20th century.

Death of the Gaon of Vilna

1797

1780: Following the appearance of the first book of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, who wrote down the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov, the leaders of the Vilna community pronounce a new excommunication against the *hasidim*.

1784: Rabbi Levi Isaac settles in Berdichev where he served as rabbi till the beginning of the following century.

1786: Death of Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk, teacher of Hasidism throughout Austrian Galicia.

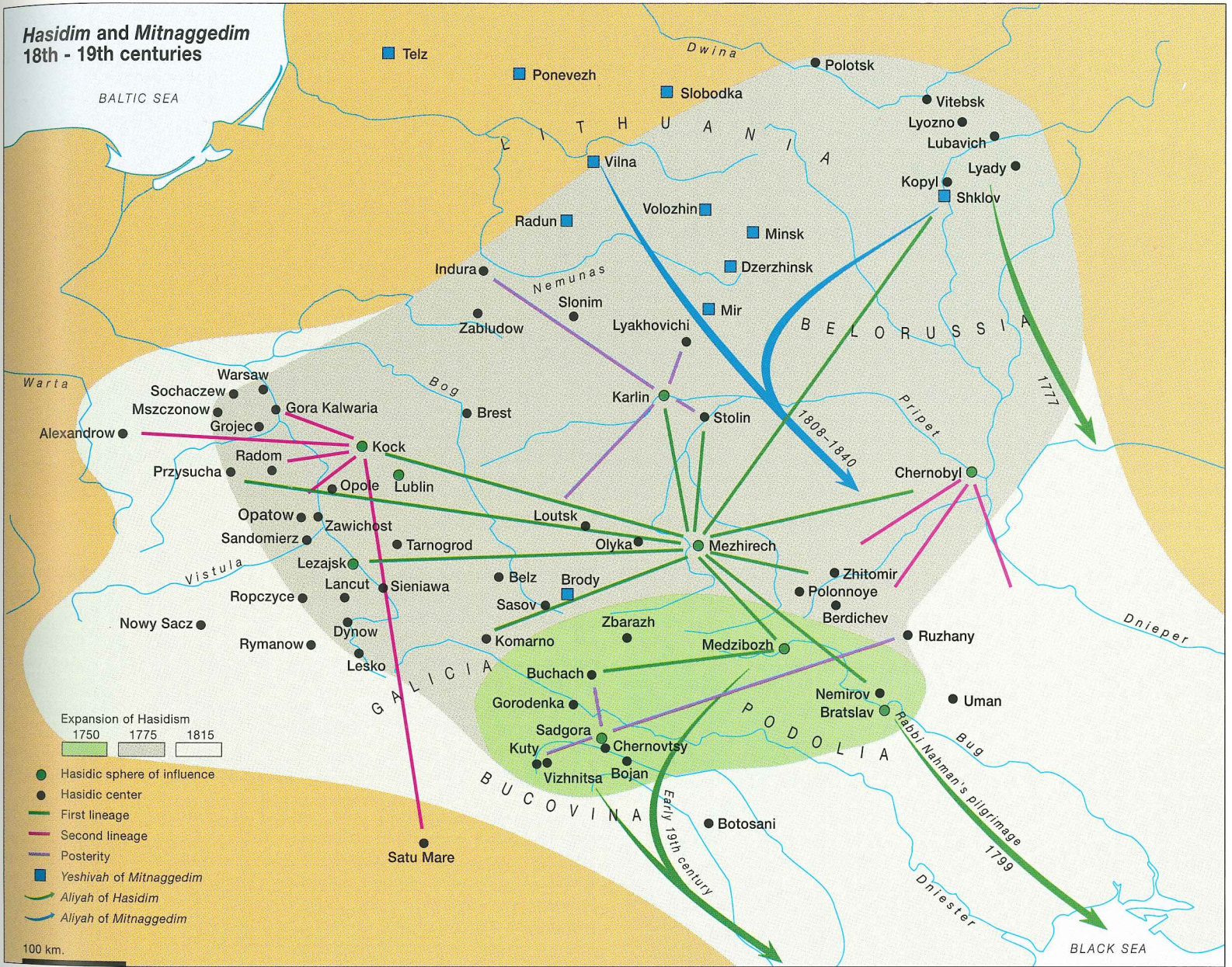
1788: Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, a Hasidic leader in Belorussia, founds *Habad* Hasidism.

1796–1801: Bitter polemics between *Hasidim* and *Mitnaggedim* in Lithuania; denounced by the “Opponents,” Shneur Zalman is imprisoned twice in St. Petersburg.

1797: Death of Elijah of Vilna (the “*Gaon* of Vilna”), the greatest opponent of the Hasidic movement.

1799: The voyage of Rabbi Nahman, great-

18th-19th Centuries



Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav

Praises of the Ba'al Shem Tov

Beginning of the Musar movement

1802

1815

1849



grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, to Palestine; in 1802 he settles in Bratslav where he founds a new Hasidic trend.

1808: A first group of Lithuanian scholars settles in Palestine and establishes a yeshiva in Safed following the doctrines of the "Gaon of Vilna."

1815: The *Praises of the Ba'al Shem Tov* appears in Kopyls, Belorussia – it is a collection of stories recounting the deeds of the founder of Hasidism and his disciples; death of Jacob Isaac, the "Seer of Lublin."

1819: Joseph Perl, a Galician *maskil* (an adherent of the *Haskalah*), publishes a fierce anti-Hasidic pamphlet in Vienna aimed at alerting the Austrian authorities to the anti-government attitudes of the Hasidim.

1821: Death of Rabbi Hayyim, founder of the yeshiva in Volozhin which was established to serve as a barrier against the spread of Hasidism.

1823: The authorities in Congress Poland

4. A Lithuanian Jew with his wife and daughter...

conduct an inquiry into the Hasidic movement which is suspected of working against the state and society.

1838: The Hasidic leader, Israel Ruzhin, is arrested by the Russian authorities following a denunciation; released after two years, he eventually settles in Sadgora in Austrian Bukovina.

1843: Rabbi Isaac, head of the Volozhin Yeshiva, and Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Lyubavitchi, leader of Habad, participate in a congress convened by the Russian authorities for the purpose of reforming Jewish education; faced with the dangers of governmental reforms and of modernity in general, Hasidim and *Mitnaggedim* forget their differences.

1849-1857: From Kovno in Lithuania, Rabbi Israel Salanter disseminates the ideas of the *Musar* movement.

5. ...and a couple of Hasidim. Engraving according to L. Hollanderski, *The Israelites of Poland*, Paris, 1846.

