Sharqiyya

Niyazi Mısri: an Ottoman Sufi Contemporary of Sabbatai Zevi Cries out against God and His False Messiah

Eldad Pardo*

His faith in the necessity of suffering for the sake of redemption,
Fulfilled,
But, surely,
Its price,
Pains

(Shelley Elkayam)

A page from the diary of Mehmet Niyazi Mısri:

> Oh God – to me a tyrant; to the Antichrist wretched, despised, humiliated – you made me a pariah! What happened now to your saying of "we never believe the wise, because we send him ourselves"? Now you have caused them to send the snake into me. For had you not revealed this verse to me, I would not have uttered these words, and they would never have sent on me this snake. You are the reason.
> Liar God! Unjust God! You have put me to torment in the hands of the Antichrist.
> If I had by now become the slave of the Antichrist, I would not have suffered any of these torments. Those calling me "ass," spoke the truth, for I have become a slave to an ill-omened one like you; I have knocked on the door of sheer nothingness, a poor, weak and humiliated. Allah! May the Antichrist bring calamity upon you and bring calamity upon those who are your slaves. Tyrant! You have only a name on the tongues; let it be forgotten, let it be erased from the hearts. You are possessed of a name, but bereft of body, bereft of essence! You are non-existent! To who shall I address my cry and my complaint? Enough, even these words are for naught. All that I say to the non-existent is for naught, for naught, for naught […][1]

---

* Dr. Eldad Pardo (epardo@mscc.huji.ac.il) conducts research and teaches history, culture and Iranian affairs at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Thanks to Paul Ballanfat from the University of Lyon who transferred to me the original unpublished passage and the draft of his biography of Niyazi. I wish to thank, for their comments and corrections, also Shlomo Avayou, Meir Bar-Asher, Idan Barir, Amnon Cohen, Halite Doğan, Avraham Elkayam, Alfred Errera, Yehuda Liebes, Emmanuel Sivan, Sarah Sviri, Ehud Toledano and Tahir Uluç, who read previous versions of this research. Remaining mistakes are all mine.

1 (Mecmû'a-i Kelimat-ı Kudsiyye-i Hazret-i Mısrî, Bursa: Orhan Kütüphanesi n° 690) Folio 57b.

This passage was taken from the diary of Mehmet Niyazi Mısri, a Sufi Muslim spiritual guide and poet from the second half of the seventeenth century.[2] Niyazi was a contemporary, and probably also a friend, of Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), founder of the Sabbatean movement who, under pressure from the Ottoman government, towards the end of his life converted to Islam.[3]. The passage expresses exceptionally harsh criticism against the Creator, who is accused of abandoning the believer, and a singular address to God, which has no equivalent passage in Jewish or Islamic literature – or at least none that my inquiries were able to find.

Niyazi Mısri's diary forces an opening into real original moving dialogue between a man and his god. The discussion is presented in real time, without mediation or processing, as a free uninhibited passage addressed to God, which reveals a sense of closeness refined through years of suffering and spiritual worship. Another important dimension of this document is the spiritual and political struggle between the mystic, who views himself as the true messiah, or the messiah of his era, and those he views as false messiahs. The struggle and its historical background illuminate time and spiritual expanse in which Sabbatai Zevi lived and acted.

Mehmet Niyazi Mısri – a Biography

Mehmet Niyazi Mısri (1618-1694)[4] was a prominent Ottoman poet and mystic who founded an independent branch in the Ahhmedian stream of the Sufi Halvetiyye order,[5] which was named after him – Mısırıyye. He lived in the seventeenth century, one thousand years after the prophet Muḥammad. At that time, the Ottoman Empire and Islam were at the peak of their vitality

---

2 Derin Terzioğlu, "Sufi and Dissident in the Ottoman Empire: Niyazi-i Misri (1618-94)," Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1999; Derin Terzioğlu, "Man in the Image of God in the Image of the Times: Sufi Self- Narratives and the Diary of Niyāzī-i Mısrī (1618-94)," *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 94 (2002), pp. 139-165. Enver Benhan Şapolyo, *Mezhepler ve Tarikatlar Tarihi* (Istanbul: Turkiye Yayinevi, 1964), pp. 172-195, especially 187. Mustafa Akşar, *Niyazi Mısri: Hayatı Eserleri ve Görüşleri*, (Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2004).

3 Gershon Scholem, *Shabbatai Tsvi VeHatnua HaShabta'it Biyemei Hayav* (Sabbatai Zevi and the Sabbatean movement in his lifetime), vol 2, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1957), pp. 720-721. Paul Fenton, "Shabbetay Sebi and his Muslim contemporary Muhammad an-Niyazi," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, ed. David R. Blumenthal, 3 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1984-88), vol. 3, pp. 81-8.

4 Niyazi signed his poems either as Niyazi or as Mısri. His full name (in Arabic transliteration) appears as Shaykh Muḥammad Niyāzi-i Miṣrī al-Ḥalwatī Ibn 'Ali Chalabī and occasionally as Shaykh Muḥammad Ibn Al-Malāṭī Al-Miṣrī Al-Burṣawī. The name Niyazi is a nickname which Ottoman poets adopted for themselves frequently, as mentioned below.

5 In Turkish: Halvetilik.

and strength – both on land and sea.[6] Although, the defeat at the gates of Vienna in 1683 and the failures which led to the treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 marked "a critical turning point not only in the relations between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, but also, on a deeper level, in the relations between Europe and Islam,"[7] this is a retrospective view of a centuries-long process. The road Niyazi's life took, his wanderings between the various centers of the empire and his involvement in urgent political affairs teach of a turbulent and restless personality. In addition, it also reveals the many opportunities the rich and powerful Ottoman Empire made available to anyone who could take advantage of them. His detailed diary and his many poems lay out the image of a man and a period – in the spirit and in the flesh.

Niyazi was born, most likely in the village of Soğanlı, or possibly Aspozi, near the city of Malatya in Anatolia, a lush area abundant in fruit trees, which inspired him as a poet. His father, Soğancızâde Ali Çelebi, was a Sufi sheikh who belonged to the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order. Niyazi's father provided his son with an excellent education, and hoped that he would join the order. However, already from a young age Niyazi displayed a rebellious and independent spirit: he preferred the Halveti Sheikh Hüseyin Efendi from Malatya over his father-teacher, who he did not admire. In 1638, when he was twenty, Niyazi left the village of his birth for religious studies. First he traveled to Diyarbakır, and then later to Mardin. In 1640 he arrived in Egypt (Mısır), which he added to his name. Soon afterwards, he departed for Baghdad where he studied for a number of years. During this time he visited Al-Karbalā', the site where the Shia martyr, Imam Ḥusayn Ibn Ali, died in suffering. Niyazi returned to Egypt and spent a number of months in the company of his spiritual mentor, the Qadarite Shaykh İbrahim Efendi. He then continued on to Cairo for three years of study with another Qadarite Shaykh and at the same time he attended the *Al-Azhar* Madrasa. In 1647, four years after his return to Anatolia, he studied under Elmalı Ümmi Sinan who was his teacher until the day he died at the age of forty.

Niyazi worked at studying and teaching, and managed to attain the rank of supplicant, "Niyazi" (Makam-ı Niyazi).[8] During this period he lived in various cities in Anatolia including: Uşak, Bursa, Elmalı and Kütahya

---

[6] Haim Gerber, *State, Society and Law in Islam: Ottoman Law in Comparative Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 16-21; Suraiya N. Faroqhi, ed., *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 3: The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603-1839* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3-8, 18.

[7] Bernard W. Lewis, *Islam and the West* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 18-19.

[8] This adjective is derived from the Persian word "niyaz," which means need or plea. Pleading (niyaz etmek, yalvarmak) is a milestone on the Sufi path of various orders in Anatolia. The supplicant isolates himself in a special cell called a pleading chamber (*Niyazi Hücresi*). With the Bektashi order, for example, the gate of pleading (Niyaz Kapısı) is one of four gates: Worship, pleading, giving and unity.

maintaining a strict routine of ascetism, while hardly consuming any food. He stopped after he received a vision at the culmination of a long evolving series of visions, like Abraham in the story in the Koran. The visions contained a repeating central motif: a star facing his eyes, whether they were closed or open. The star would expand from vision to vision. His mentor, Ümmi Sinan, ruled that his student, Niyazi, had reached the level of "seeing the heart," and quoted the verse from the Koran, referring to Abraham: "When the night covered him over, he saw a star he said "This is my Lord." But when it set, he said "I do not love those that set'" (Koran 6:76).[9] After Sinan died, Niyazi became the leader of a Sufi group, and established teaching, praying, chanting, singing and rituals in the Bursa grand Mosque, Ulu Camii. He also initiated the manufacture of jewelry and their sales in the city squares. During this period he became acknowledged as a religious "pivot" (*Kutb/Qutb*). His diary contains a detailed description of his inner experience as an ongoing enlightenment. Among other things, he reported of experiencing transformations into a beam of light that slices through space, and scattering as thousands of light particles across the universe.

Niyazi stood in the midst of a struggle revolving around the centers of power in the Ottoman capital. This was between puritan circles among the Orthodox jurists (*İlmiyye*) and institutionalized jurists, but mainly against the Sufi orders and some of their leaders.[10] These fundamentalist puritans preachers (*Vâizân*), who were known as Kadızâdeli, named after their founder Kadızâde Mehmed (d. 1635), destroyed the tombs of holy men; shut down meetings that included coffee drinking, smoking tobacco and opium; exiled Sufi leaders; and, banned certain Sufi practices, such as concerts, ceremonies and dance (*Sema*, *Raks*, *Devram*) particularly of the Mevlevi whirling dervishes (*Semazenler*, *Dönen Dervişler*), which was banned for eighteen years (1665-1683). Special antagonism was reserved to Ibn `Arabi (1165-1240) and his doctrine. One of the prominent authorities in the anti-Sufi movement was Vânî Mehmet Efendi (d.1685), the teacher of both Sultan Mehmet IV (1642-1693) and his Grand Vizier Köprülü Fazıl Ahmet Paşa. He concentrated the efforts against the Halvetiyye. Niyazi calls him a pharaoh, a sorcerer (*Sahhar*), and especially a "false messiah" or Antichrist (*Deccal*) while Niyazi himself is the "true messiah" (*Mesih, Mehdi*). However, it is important to note that the distinctions between orthodoxy and Sufism, and between radical Sufism and moderate Sufism are not that simple. There were figures involved with different groups, and personal, spiritual and power struggles

---

[9] *The Qur'an: Translation*, Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 7th edition, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an Inc., 2001, p. 82.

[10] Madeline C. Zilfi, "The Kadizadelis: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, № 4 (October 1986), pp. 251-269.

depend upon the context of their time period and location. They cannot be placed in strict rigid categories.[11]

Vânî Efendi conspired with the Grand Vizier, Köprülü Fazıl Ahmet Paşa, against Niyazi, who on his part openly criticized both. As a result he was exiled for a year to Rhodes (1673), and later, twice, to Limni (Lemnos/Limnos). Overall, Niyazi spent eighteen years of his life in a long exile on the islands because of his insistence out of a mystical-messianic viewpoint to take a harsh confrontational stand and avoid compromises. During his exile on Limni, Niyazi became a close friend, and later a bitter rival of another Sufi personage from the *Halvetiyye* order, Karabaş Veli. Veli had been exiled to the islands, but because he was inclined towards a more practical compromising approach, he was soon restored to a position of power, which included giving sermons in the Sultan's presence. Karabaş Veli was also called by Niyazi a "false messiah" because he adopted for himself the status of "seal of the saints" (or friends of God, Hatemülevlia/*Khatm al-'Awliyāa'*),[12] which is the equivalent of the Sufi concepts "pivot" (*Kutb, Qutb*), "messiah of the time" (*Mahdi az-Zamān*), and the "perfect human" (İnsanı Kâmil/Al-Insān al-Kāmil).[13] These are terms that hint of the end of days, but they also contain a contemporary, generational aspect associated with renewers (*Müceddid*).[14] Since it is not possible for two true messiahs to exist in one generation, it is clear that from Niyazi's point of view all of the others are cheats, robbers and "false messiahs."

---

[11] Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of 'Abd-al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982), pp 88-101; Zilfi, "The Kadizadelis," p. 252. Madeline C. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age (1600-1800)*, Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988, pp. 129-181.

[12] Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhī (circa 820-910) was probably the first to introduce this title, granted by God to forty truthful men (siddiqun). The last one will be distinguished as the Seal of Friendship of God, Khātim al-Wilāyah and he will be God's proof' Hujjat Allāh. Bernd Radtke and John O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism: Two Works by Al-Hakīm Al-Tirmidhī*, Richmond Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1996, p. 109. Sarah Sviri, *Hasufim: Antologya* (The Sufis: an Anthology) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press/Mapa, 2008, in Hebrew), pp. 155-156 and footnote 167 there. Ibn `Arabi sees in Jesus the Seal of Sainthood and himself the Seal of Muhammadan Saints. Michel Chodkiewicz , *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, translated by Liadain Sherrard, The Islamic Texts Society, 1996, chapter 9. Chellaian Lawrence, *Jesus as Prophet in Christianity and Islam: A Model for Interfaith Dialogue*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, pp. 171, 173, 176. On opposition to these concepts: Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1999, especially p. 72.

[13] Sara Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things: Images on the Sufi Path* (Inverness CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 1997), pp. 64, 72-73, 122, 186.

[14] Eisenstadt refers to the "mahdis" as "a kind of renewing messiahs who returned and reappeared throughout history in many Moslem societies," in Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, *Fundementalism, Katot Vemahapeiḥa: Hamemad Hayakovini Shel Hamoderniyut* (Fundamentalism, Cults and Revolution: the Jacobean Aspect of Modernity) (Haifa and Jeusalem: Keter, 2004, in Hebrew), p. 33.

Niyazi as the Background for the Period of Sabbatai Zevi

Gershon Scholem wrote about Sabbatai Zevi's arrest in February 1666 that "it is obvious that the grand vizier demonstrated surprising tolerance, perhaps because of Sabbatai Zevi's charm and perhaps to prevent his transformation into a saint."[15] Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) was a contemporary of Niyazi, and was most likely a close friend, particularly after his conversion in 1666.[16] Looking at Sabbatai Zevi's arrest from the perspective of the struggle of the İlmiyye against the Sufis reveals that for the Ottoman authorities, the case of Sabbatai Zevi was far from unusual. It could be viewed as the struggle of a "Sufi who sees himself as a messiah" against traditional religious legal scholars. Moreover, Vânî Mehmet Efendi distinguished himself from earlier Kadızâdelis by targeting also non-Muslims, through the prohibition of wine sales and church renovations, as well as encouraging conversions. Vânî was personally involved in converting Sabbatai Zevi. Other Jewish and Muslim "messiahs" were also converted with their followers into puritan/ mainstream Islam in return for a nice position. Mass conversions by Christians were commonplace.[17]

Scholem states that rebellions in the empire were suppressed with an iron hand; however, I do not assume that they viewed Sabbatai Zevi as a rebel, but rather as one player among many, even though he was Jewish, in the political-religious arena, which was fairly liberal. The real struggle occurred between religious players in the higher echelons of Ottoman Islam. It is important to note that Niyazi was part of these high ranking players and he maintained close ties with grand viziers, such as Köprülü Fazıl Ahmet Paşa, mentioned earlier. Thus we find him preaching in the Aya Sofya mosque in the center of Istanbul in the presence of the sultan Mehmet IV and dozens of religous figures and clerks. He would create dramatic policy changes on controversial topics, such as uttering the name of Allah out loud and mystical dancing. At the same time, as was mentioned previously, there were long periods in which Niyazi stood in harsh opposition to the

---

[15] Gershon Scholem, "Shabbatai Tsvi," *Haentsiklopedya Haivrit* (The Hebrew encyclopedia), vol. 31, (1979), p.440.

[16] Scholem, *Shabbatai Tsvi* (Sabbatai Zevi), pp. 720-721. Fenton ("Shabbatay," p. 85) suggests that "the dajjāl referred to by Niyazi alludes in reality to Shabbatay Ṣvi."

[17] Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety*, 153 ff. According to Zilfi, the Ottomans saw the conversion as natural. Lewis and Roth point to possible pressure: Geoffrey L. Lewis and Cecil Roth, "New Light on the Apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 53, No. 3 (Jan., 1963), pp. 219-225. The new atmosphere of conversions and stricter application of *dhimmi* laws, unleashed suspicion toward Islam among some Jews. Martin Jacobs, "An Ex-Sabbatean's Remorse? Sambari's Polemics against Islam,"*Jewish Quarterly Review*, 97, no.3 (2007), pp. 347-378.

authorities because he refused to compromise his path or his view of himself as the messiah.

The wealth of terms and wide range of religious knowledge which Niyazi demonstrated is significant because of his use of elements which are not limited to Suni Islam as was the custom in the Ottoman Empire. His words contained Shiite and even heterodox Shiite aspects. This is seen in references to the sanctity of the prophet's family, and more so in his view that the Shiite imams Al-Ḥasan and Al-Ḥusayn were prophets and his identifying with their suffering as martyrs.[18] He adopts the same approach with Jesus. Islam does recognize Jesus as a prophet, and his connection to love and suffering inflamed the imagination of the Sufis; however, Niyazi's empathy with the redeemer stands out in particular.[19] This emphasis of the Empire's sworn enemies, the Safavi-Shiite Iran (1501-1722) and Christian Europe, even though they are not opposed by Islamic law, is quite unusual – especially when considering Niyazi's actions. For example, at one point he asked to volunteer for Jihad in the ranks of the Ottoman army when it invaded Austria in 1691.[20] In his response to the sultan's polite refusal, Niyazi mentions the New Testament. Niyazi's belief, which is similar to the Shiite and Christian faiths in that aspect, was that the root of redemption lies in the suffering and distress brought about by oppression and persecution – in the public political context. His provocative conduct and his stubborn insistence that he should be allowed to spread his teachings uninhibited encouraged others to harm him and increased the sufferings which were part of his outlook.

Niyazi's fiery personality portrays the Ottoman state of the seventeenth century as an intellectual and political dynamic turbulent location. Political oppression also existed, which is seen by the fact that political and spiritual

---

[18] Fenton ("Shabbatay," p. 83) believes this Shiite influence most likely originates from the Bektashi influence on Niyazi's thinking. There is a sharp distinction in the twelver Shia between a prophet and and an Imam. Although they are both close to God in that they possess "Vilayet" (a special bond of love to God), the Imams are not considered prophets. Yet, Niyazi is calling the imams Al-Ḥasan and Al-Ḥusay prophets. This distinction had become blurred in radical and heterodox circles in Shia. It is possible that Niyazi came into contact with these groups in Anatolia, such as the "Ali Ilahi" circles and the Bektashis. Among these circles the status of the imams, and at their head, Ali, is higher than the prophets. According to a comment by Meir Bar-Asher, see: Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism* (Leiden and Jerusalem: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 134-135; Henri Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects Sprituels et Philosophiques*, vol. 1 (Le Shiisme duodécimain), (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 41-43, 76, 219-284; Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, translated by David Streight, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 29, 159, note 151.

[19] Javad Nurbakhsh, *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis* (London: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1983). passim. Tarif Khalidi, ed., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp 41-42, 170.

[20] This shows that Sufis are also willing to focus on the "lesser Jihad," i.e. the war against the infidels.

dissidents were persecuted, jailed, and, like Sabbatai Zevi, forced to choose between death and forsaking their religion. Niyazi should be interpreted as an expression of defiance, while in great distress after having been defeated by his institutionalized rival and sent into exile.

Niyazi's Words

Niyazi wrote in real time as the experience occurred. The writing should be considered an integral and inseparable part of the event reflecting the feelings of the mystic writer at the actual time he is composing the words.[21]

Despite the fact that he was a known figure who voiced his opinion in the public discourse of the time, it appears as though the handwritten passage quoted at the beginning of this article was not intended for publication or at the very least not for immediate publication. Yet, Niyazi's integrity and his will to test boundaries match his public persona which is was? characterized with intense and truthful speech without fear of any authority or rivalry. Niyazi was active in the *Halvetiyye* order, an order which placed a lot of emphasis on isolation and long concentrated internal contemplation. Therefore, this text does not contain a general-public cultural meaning and it does not convey a cultural dialect that mediates between the biographical personality and the group/community level. Instead, it can be seen as an intermediate space between internal and external reality within the individual; a connecting space carrying the dialogue between a man and his god. And yet, this text also eternalizes an ephemeral and intimate journey that can take place only in an environment that allows it. God is Allah, but also Tanrı, bringing in both Islamic and Turkish terminology. Being a slave of God (*Tanrı kulu*) means a pious man in Turkish, but here the *kul* could also serve Islamic Antichrist (*Deccal*). The *kul* brings to mind the Ottoman – and Islamic – system in which Kuls, or slaves, were paradoxically-yet-typically the most powerful and privileged in society.[22] Talking to/ being in the Divine can only occur with Sufi mystics. Breaking the rules and religious bubbling was typical to the period from the puritan Kadızâdelis to Sabbatai Zevi, a Jewish messiah flipping sides, but the kind of interaction we observe here, could only happen to Niyazi. Consequently, these words cannot be considered an isolated separate experience.

As a person who was raised with a Sufi background, Niyazi held a position which in his own view and that of his environment allowed him an

---

[21] Terzioğlu, "Man in the Image," pp. 139-165

[22] Ehud R. Toledano, "Late Ottoman Concepts of Slavery (1830s-1880s)," *Poetics Today*, 14/3: (1993): 477-506. Dror Ze'evi, 'Kul and Getting Cooler: The Dissolution of Elite Collective Identity and the Formation of Official Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 11(1996): 2, 177-195.

unmediated connection with the almighty. This was, anthropologically speaking, his "cultural schema." This kind of communication was part of the Ottoman Sufi mystical civilization in which Niyazi lived: borrowing a term coined by Haviva Pedaya, part of his "spiritual space."[23] However, it is possible to question whether this was indeed a mystical experience, a revelation. The writer was a prominent Sufi mystic who headed a branch named after him, Mısırıyye, in the Aḥmedian branch of the *Halvetiyye* order. As a mystic, he aspired for an unmediated communication with the divine world not only through memorizing prayers and supplications, prostrating himself on the tombs of holy men, quoting in an ordered fashion verses and spells, but rather through a direct honest penetrating talk with his creator. Furthermore, such grievances and outcries indicate a sense of a tight bond with sanctity. Yet it is difficult to refer to this as a revelation or a mystical experience because only one side is represented. The man is addressing his God, but there is no response from the other side. His presence is only felt as a second person present in the speaker's words. This is the situation of every believer: rationalist or mystic. They all address their creator in supplication and conversation. But at the same time, the bluntness of what is being said, its directness and it having been written, even in a personal diary, add to the quality and validity of the words. This was not a scribed text, but rather fluent writing, alive and flowing words. The hand that wrote the passage was *speaking* not writing a protocol.

This harsh text and the direct manner in which Niyazi addresses his creator would cause any god-fearing person to shudder. He does not mince his words in his rage, and is not really consistent either: from the strong-yet-evil god that is "tyrant, unjust, liar"; to "ill-omened"; to "wretched, despised, humiliated"; to "bereft of body, bereft of essence"; all the way to "non-existent." He does not hesitate to curse his god: "Allah! May the Antichrist bring calamity upon you and bring calamity upon those who are your slaves."

Niyazi was a devout believer, and as such how can the divine glory and his harsh quarrelsome words be bridged? One possible answer is that the mystical revelation frequently occurs at a time of distress. This is God's way of revealing himself to his worshippers at their time of need, and at such times it is only natural to feel anger and wrath. Yoram Bilu describes an incident where a healer from the Israeli town of Yeruham rebukes her patrons, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and Rabbi-David-and-Moses, when she cannot understand the diagnosis.[24] The healer emphasizes that such a

---

[23] In a lecture at the Van Leer institute, September 2005.

[24] For example, this is how she lashes out at the tsaddik: "Why do you cause problems for people?," or "I'll make you find a husband for this woman." See: Yoram Bilu, *Shoshbinei Hakedoshim: Holmim, Merpa'ot, Vetsadikim Basfar Ha'ironi BeYisrael* (The Best-men of Saints:

relationship with the tsaddiks is allowed only for those like her, who have a close relationship with their patron saint, and is not possible with other people.

Refusal to accept a divine decree is not necessarily the way of spiritual figures, who are close to the almighty. This is not about acts of rebellion like the feministic analysis which compares rebellion to Eve who tasted from the forbidden fruit. The examples of defiance against heaven and refusal to accept a divine decree, as Hayyim Nahman Bialik's says, "If you have in you mercy," go back as far as Cain. It is possible to interpret his action in killing his brother, God's favorite, as refusal to acknowledge the almighty's decision. This is also the case with Abraham,[25] Moses,[26] the Israelite nation,[27] Gideon[28] and Jonah.[29] God's actions disappoint Job.[30] This is also the case in the book of lamentations.[31] Add to this the disappointment in the New Testament,[32] and the Shiite despondency over the massacre at Al-Karbalā', when at the moment of his death, Al-Ḥusayn redeems all the Shiites in history and liberates his believers with his blood.[33]

Dreamers, Healers, and righteous men in the urban hinterlands in Israel) (Haifa: The University of Haifa Publications, 2005, in Hebrew), p. 18.

[25] Who has difficulty accepting God's words literally, whether it is with Hagar or with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

[26] Who complains "Why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me" (Exodus 5:22) and "Did I conceive all this people, Did I bear them, that You should say to me 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?" (Numbers 11:12) and "If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" (Ibid, 15).

[27] "Let us be and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?" (Exodus 14:12).

[28] Gideon humbly and with much hesitation, repeatedly test's God's patience.

[29] Jonah explains that is not worth conducting business deals with God because he is merciful and kind, and is therefore inconsistent in his judgment: "For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, LORD, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (Jonah 4:2-3).

[30] "Afterward, Job began to speak and cursed the day of his birth. Job spoke up and said: Perish the day on which I was born, and the night it was announced, 'A male has been conceived!'[...] To those who wait for death but it does not come, who search for it more than for treasure" (Job 3:1-3, 21)

[31] The god in heaven also disappoints his holy nation: The Lord has acted like a foe, He has laid waste Israel" (Lamentations 2:5); "The Lord has rejected His altar, disdained His Sanctuary" (Ibid, 7); "You have made us filth and refuse in the midst of the peoples. All our enemies loudly rail against us. (Ibid, 3:45-46)

[32] Compare Christ's words: "'Eli, Eli, Lama Shavaktani?' that is "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?'" (Mathew 27:46; Mark 15:34)

[33] In Al-Karbalā', the mother of the Imam Al-Ḥusayn cries out that his death in suffering, at Allah' command, is supposed to redeem all the Shiites in all times. "He is about to be taken down by a cruel and unjust fate," and Al-Ḥusayn says: "Ho, mother, look and see what they have made of me?". She responds: "Oh God! Oh Heaven! I will not stop protesting with all my heart and soul against your tyranny! How is it that your actions do not lead to

Niyazi's grievance is harsher and more direct than any of the aforementioned acts of defiance. His complaints address two issues: God's weakness and his lack of credibility – the hypocrisy that Niyazi detected in him. In fact, Niyazi is accusing God of being misleading in the context of the struggle against the false messiah/Antichrist (*Deccal*). The irony is that the god of truth is accused of lying. Niyazi is not selecting his words. In his personal internal dialogue he pours his wrath upon God unrelentingly. This combination of human sacrifice and God's weakness shed a new perspective on Slavoj Žižek's discussion regarding the illusion of sacrifice. After Jacques Lacan and René Girard, Žižek states that the offering is a "gift of appeasement" to "the great other" – God – with the intention of placating his desire, which is to hide the absent in the other, his lack of consistency, and in any case his lack of existence, which is proven by this desire. The sacrifice is intended for the hypnotized public who view the scapegoat as evidence of the existence and power of "the great other" who runs the world. "By the very act of sacrifice we simulate in advance the existence of a recipient who guarantees the consistency of our experience and its significance." The guilt for the God's failings in the world of reality is transferred to one of the believers who becomes an offering and an interpreter. His role is to explain through the sin for which the act of sacrifice is meant to atone that the guilt is not in the God who is still powerful and existing, but in the man. The greatness of the monotheism emerging from Job's throat was in presenting the voice of the victim, the individual who refuses to play this game, and sharply protests his status of sacrifice and scapegoat. The victim in voicing an independent opinion returns the burden of proof to the God, as if saying: "What does the lord want from me?"[34]

In the model that Niyazi presents, he takes the idea a step forward by exposing in clear words his conclusion – like Lacan – that his victimization proves that God is indeed weak. However, Niyazi is not Lacan who talks of the "dark god" as nothing more than a psychological construct. For Niyazi, obviously, a weak god does not mean that God does not exist. In addition, he is unwilling to accept responsibility for his situation, and places the blame on

---

thousands of claims for justice [against you]; this I will never know!". and his sister Zainab adds: "Oh heaven, the axe of tyranny has toppled the foundations of my being; are not my cries of despair reaching your ears? [..] What have I done that justifies this suffering?". Al-Ḥusayn, himself, has accepted his fate, but is careful to remind God to uphold his obligations: "here comes the dagger to assault my head! Well, fine, I am glad oh my God! Do not also you forget to uphold the obligations you took upon yourself. On the day of Resurrection, forgive the sinners, forgive all the Shiites, even the guilty ones among them because I am liberating them all at the price of my blood!". This is according to a Persian Ta'ziya play from the end of the eighteenth century. See: Charles Virolleaud, *Le Theatre Persan ou Le Drame de Kerbéla* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1950).

[34] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out,* Hebrew Translation Roni Yador, (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 2004, in Hebrew), pp. 68-70.

God's weakness. This approach is different from the Christian view, which views God's weakness and his acceptance of man's guilt as a source of strength; after all, Jesus, the lord and king, is the ultimate victim, the ultimate culprit and also God. Also in the Shia, the Imam, who being the light is closer to the divine, suffers for his believers and opens for them the gateway to paradise. Comparing Niyazi to Jesus, the human messiah, shows that he heavily focuses on his status as a victimized messiah. It is important to note that this motif can also be found in Judaism in the midrashim of redemption, medieval literature, and in this case Sabbateanism.[35]

With Niyazi, the weakness of God is also different from the Kabbalist model, whose role is to aid God and encourage him to fulfill his role. The Kabbalists, if it is possible to generalize, assume God's weakness to the point where a "crisis in divinity" is expressed in the world – a situation which requires remedying.[36] This is a theurgical function, a human action which amplifies the divine presence and increases the abundance of light and holiness from above. "Do not pray for what you lack,"[37] says Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch. When praying, "Pray for the deficiency in the divine presence."[38] One of the methods for awakening God, at least with the Jewish Hassids, is to increase happiness because "The Creator's main enjoyment comes from his desire for his work… the fire of enthusiasm."[39] An erotic game of the tsaddik, or the Jewish people as a whole, with the Almighty or the Divine Presence is also part of the theurgical move in different periods.[40] Niyazi adopts a different approach. Instead of rejoicing and making merry, he hurls insults at the creator of the world and chastises him for his treachery and weakness. It is possible that according to Niyazi, the almighty can be

---

[35] Avraham Elkayam, "Kavru Emunati; Igeret Me'et Sabbatai Zevi Mimekom Galuto" (My Faith Has Been Buried; A Note by Sabbatai Zevi from His Place of Exile," *Pe'amim*, 55 (1993, in Hebrew), pp 4-37; Yehuda Liebes, "Hashabta'ut Ugevulot Hadat" (Sabbateanism and the Borders of Religion), from: *Hahalom Veshivro: Hatenuah Hashabtait Ushluhoteha: Meshihiyut, Shabta'ut U-Frankism, Mehkarei Yerushalayim Bemahshevet Yisrael* (The Dream and Its Breaking: The Sabbatean Movement and its Offshoots: Messianism, Sabbateanism and Frankism, Jerusalem Research in Jewish Thought), vol. 16-17 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2001, in Hebrew), pp. 1-21.

[36] Gershom Scholem, *Pirkey Yesod Behavant Hakabala Usemaleha* (Basic Chapters for Understanding the Kabbala and Its Symbols) (Jerusalem: Mosad Biyalik, 1980, in Hebrew), p. 108.

[37] Moshe Chalamish, *Mavo Lakabala* (Introduction to Kabbala) (Jerusalem: "Hillel Ben Chaim" series and "Sifriyat Elinor," Hahistadrut Hazionit, undated, in Hebrew), pp. 187-196.

[38] *Ibid*, p. 196.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] Daniel Abrams, *Haguf Ha'elohi Hanashi Bakabala: Iyyun Betsurot shel Ahava Gufanit Uminiyut Nashit shel Ha'elohut* (The Divine Feminine Body in Kabbala: A Study of the Divine Forms of Physical Love and Feminine Sexuality), (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005, in Hebrew), pp. 31, 41-53; Scholem, *Pirkey Yesod*, p. 230.

prompted into action by taunting. The goal is to increase God's wrath to the point where he awakens and demonstrates his power on earth.

Perhaps the difference is not that great. The human soul contains many contradictions, and this is also the case with the spiritual journeys along its paths. There are many pairs of apparent opposites: strength and weakness, hope and fear, love and awe.[41] How is it possible to love when afraid? How is it possible to love the almighty, whose power is so great? How is it possible to contain such a love? Evolutionary psychology would credit this dualism to a primeval wiring of the nerves in the various areas of the brain, which is fixated from early childhood or the dawn of man, and instills "a dual feeling of pleasure and horror."[42] This is a love which returns in authority situations, encouraged by the evolution between the strong and the weak, between student and teacher, between father and son, between the client and her psychologist or between the nation and its leader.

Niyazi's biography would indicate that a primeval wiring in his childhood awakened in him a repeated desire to experience destructive love. This is a love that confronts first, as we have seen, his father, thenthe political and divine authority in a desperate even pathetic attempt to achieve a non-existing redemption.[43] In Sufism, love is a central axis between the Shaykh and his students, and between the lover (*Aşık*) and the object of his love – God (*Maşuk*). Our modern culture suspects selfish loves between authority figures and those under their rule, and tends to believe that true love can only exist between equals. One way or another, love dissolves gaps, unifies the hearts of the lovers and brings about the equality, which in our case – as paradoxical as it may seem – is the equality between man and his creator. Therefore, it is possible to view Niyazi's lashing out at the Almighty as forming a kind of equal relationship to allow for the foundation of a loving existence with the assumption being that God wants the love of his chosen.

In the Sufi world there are ladders and paths, but already in the eighth century, ash-Shaqīq al-Balkhi (d. 810) from the Sufi Khorasānī school of thought, describes an example of such a relationship. He stated that relying on God is a spiritual situation (*Hal*). Among his theological innovations are the four stages to the transformation of the soul: Ascetism or avoidance (*Zuhd*), fear (*Khawf*), longings for paradise (*ash-shawq Ila al-Janna*) and love of God (*al-Maḥabba li-Llah*). In addition to these stages there is living together with God in this world, in which the believer's heart becomes connected to

---

41 Sviri, *Hasufim*, pp. 196-197; Sara Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope: on the Coincidence of Opposites in Islamic Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 9 (1987, in Hebrew),pp. 316-349.

42 Ada Lampert, *Nefesh Eiruma: Masa-Mada'i ishi El Nefesh Ha'adam* (Naked Soul: A Scientific Personal Journey into the Human Soul) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2007, in Hebrew), p. 152

43 *Ibid,* pp. 135-136

the creator and absorbs of him. Those who reach this level find themselves exchanging secrets with the almighty (*Munājātuhu*). God becomes a companion in their lives, a source of calm, happiness and merriment of the heart.[44] In this context the verse, taken from an Israeli pop song on Yechezkel (Ezekiel) the fantastic prophet who "he and God are like you and me"[45] comes to mind. "Yechezkel" is a secular song. In a religious context it is rare that one talks to god as "a man talking to his friend,"[46] even more so when there is great rudeness and even impudence. Yet, the holy wrath may be part of the love, as is written in Shlomo Avayou's poem: "Tell him tell dad, our gloomy father / From all your awed flatterers, no one has loved you / As I have loved you, your rebellious son."[47] Also, although the wrath and the love are opposites, one is imprinted in the other to the extent that it is identified with it. Thus, whoever cannot feel anger towards God cannot feel a deep love towards him.

This is where the unity of contrasts is introduced. One of the ways of understanding the infinite is the attempt to absorb the opposites. In Sufism this is sometimes referred to as arriving at the "meeting of the two seas" (*Majma' al-Baḥrayn*). Seeing something and its opposite at the same time allows us to sense, if not to understand the condition of the primeval infinite. Thus, for example Sufi poetry is replete with paradoxes, such as drinking wine, which is forbidden by Islam, or visiting pagan temples or synagogues as spiritual steps. Thus, the Sufi dervish is called 'lewd' (*rend* in Persian) and sacred terms are borrowed from the fields of wanton sexuality and morality, such as pub, whorehouse, peeping, homo-erotic falling in love etc'.[48] It is

---

[44] Sviri, "'Hahavana Panim Ein Sefor la': Al Istinibāt, Parshanut Sufit Vehavana Mistit" (Understanding Has an Infinite Amount of Faces: On Istinibāt, Sufi Interpretation and Mystical Understanding), in: Meir Bar-Asher, Simon Hopkins, Sarah Stroumsa and Bruno Chiesa, Eds., *Davar Davur 'Al Ofnav: Meḥkarim Beparshanut Hakoran Vehamikra Biyeme Habenayim* (In Logical Order: Research into Exegesis of the Koran and the Pentateuch in the Middle Ages), (Jerusalem: Machon ben Tsvi Leheker Kehilot Yisrael Bamizraḥ, 2007, in Hebrew), pp. 202-203.

[45] Haḥalonot Hagevohim, "Yechezkel," (words by Haim Hefer, tune by Shmulik Kraus, 1967).

[46] Israel Najara, *Kli Maḥezik Beraḥa* (A vessel containing blessings) (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 29

[47] Shlomo Avayou, "Vesa'uni, se'u Eḥay" (and carry me, carry, my brothers), in: *Rocky Martsiano. Gibor Ne'uray: Shirim 1973-2005* (Rocky Marciano. Hero of My Youth: Poems 1973-2005), (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at Keshev Leshira, 2006, in Hebrew), p. 50; Meir Bar-Asher connects this poem to Rabbi Amnon from Mainz to whom the poem "Unetanneh Tokef" is attributed. It is said that he dictated this poem in a dream, after he died sanctifying God's name. This was the impression I got from him at the "Yetser, Yotser VeYetsira" (inclination, creator and creation) evening at the Midrasha LeHeker Hibat Zion in Rishon Letsion, March 8, 2006.

[48] See for example: "What wine what pleasure in the hidden darkness? An empty hollow deed/ we have joined the alliance of beggars, and what will be will be!" The beggars are the mystics and wine is the mystic experience. Hāfeṭ. "Sharab" (Wine) (Persian translated by author).

possible that placing abominations in God is a method for reaching him on these two planes. In the path of love, the placing of these abominations is intended to remove the fear by diminishing God, which, in a way, allows the love to flow to him freely uninhibited. In the path of unity of contrasts, both extremities are contained in the thinking of God simultaneously as both all-powerful ("tyrant") and majestic, and also as helpless, miserable and unfortunate ("non-existent"); as good and just, and as an unjust liar.. Niyazi lived in surroundings that accepted these concepts, and he absorbed them whether he intended to or not.

The unity of contrasts, "the change from good to evil," in Nietzsche's words, allows the clarity that the Hassid seeks. In a Buddhistic context, it would be said that the best way to sense the taste of infinity would be to think of two opposite things at the same time.[49] Now it is possible to introduce Gershom Scholem's statement regarding Sabbatai Zevi, Niyazi's contemporary, that the heart of the mob fell captive to that "odd mixture of esteemed nobility and unrestrained wantonness."[50] This is seen in the view that Sabbatai Zevi converted to Islam as part of an action with *kellipot* (shells) for the sake of redemption: a sin that is an act of extreme piety.

However, I would like to suggest another alternative, something primarily attributed to Judaism – the dialogue with the other.[51] Judaism has evolved into a body of knowledge which is not quick to convert the other, i.e. to change the "other" into an "I." The I is myself and the other is someone else, and the tension between them – in peaceful ways – is the secret of existence. Islam is a universal religion, which strives to unify the entire world. In Islamic mysticism, like in Zen-Buddhism, there is a unio-mystica element – becoming one with God and the universe (*Tawḥīd*, *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*). According to a recent interpretation of Ibn `Arabi, a human may become "a synthesis of the natural (manifest) and the spiritual (nonmanifest) aspects of reality. As such, he will have attained a state of perfection and become a *barzakh* between the Real ... and His creation."[52] The most famous assertions of this matter, are that of Ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj's (d. 922) exclamation: "I am the truth/God!" (*Ana al-Haqq*); and Abu Yazid Al-Bistami (d. 848 or 875): "Glory be to me! How great is my majesty"! (*Subḥānī, Ma A'aṭam Sha'nī*). In Zen-Buddhism this is emphasized with the negation of the duality in the world and the elimination of the ego – "the minor me" – in favor of "the major me."

---

[49] A popular meditation technique is to think of a large stone which was plucked from a mountain, as if it were separate and part of the mountain simultaneously. This was heard from Oded Maimon 2004 in a conversation with the author.

[50] Scholem, "Sabbatai Zevi," p. 439; see also the time when Passover, Sukkot and Shavuot were celebrated in one week in Istanbul in 1658, *ibid*, p. 436.

[51] Efraim Meir, *Filisofim Kiyumiyim Yehudiyim Berav-Siah* (Existential Jewish Philosophers in Debate), (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004, in Hebrew), particularly pp. 157-158.

[52] Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn Al-'Arabi's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship Between God and the World*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 116.

In both traditions polishing the soul like a mirror or bright tile to objectively reflect the world is a simile for the desire to cancel the "I" and perfect unity.[53]

In this passage, by attacking God and pouring out his bitterness in a fearless manner, which does not include a desire for mingling or bridging the Real and His creation, Niyazi reveals himself as a believer in the separation of authorities. Despite the fact that he is a Sufi mystic, he is placing a border, if not a border dispute between himself and the Creator of the world. In this respect, Niyazi is closer to the Jewish mindset. Niyazi's mysticism, which is revealed in the text, is expressed in his knowledge and confidence (*Tawakkul*) that the almighty is alive, exists and is receptive. The belief that he is expressing may be of separation as a value; separation even at the risk of rebellion and lack of faith in God's ability to save his wrathful lover-believer.

[Back to Contents]

[53] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970), pp. 90-95.