

## *Mrs. Jonathan Eibeschuetz's Epitaph: A Grave Matter Indeed*

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The Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy erupted on that fateful Thursday morning, February 4, 1751, when R. Jacob Emden announced in his synagogue in Altona that an amulet ascribed to the chief rabbi—R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz—could only have been written by a Sabbatian heretic. The controversy between these two rabbinic titans continued unabated until Eibeschuetz's death in 1764. After Eibeschuetz's death, Emden continued to wage the battle against Eibeschuetz's memory, and against his descendants and disciples, until his own death in 1776.

At the height of the controversy, in 1756, R. Jacob Emden published a pamphlet in Altona, entitled *פּתח עינים*. It was a devastating critique of R. Ezekiel Landau of Prague, who had dared to suggest a compromise that would have ended the controversy.<sup>1</sup> Emden succeeded in torpedoing Landau's efforts, as well as all other efforts to bring the controversy to a close.<sup>2</sup> The controversy was never really resolved; it ultimately subsided only with the deaths of all the participants. When all who had participated in it died, the controversy entered a new phase, namely a scholastic one, in which his-

1. For the full text of Landau's compromise, and an analysis of it, see my forthcoming study in the *Rabbi Leo Jung Memorial Volume*.

2. For an analysis of the different approaches of Emden and Landau toward ending the controversy, see my study in the *Marvin Fox Festschrift*.

torians took turns condemning or defending either Emden or Eibeschuetz. That second phase was still thriving in 1989, and there appears to be no imminent danger that it will abate in the years ahead. A passage from Emden's *פתח עינים* forms the focus of this discussion.

Elkele Eibeschuetz, Eibeschuetz's devoted wife of some forty-five years, died in 1755 when, after a lengthy battle, she succumbed to cancer. Elkele's first yahrzeit had barely passed when a vicious attack against her husband—and pertaining to her epitaph—appeared in print in the *פתח עינים*. The passage reads.<sup>3</sup>

ולמען הראות כי אי אפשר לו לכתוב שום כתיבה ובלי איזה רמז מן המינות המשוקצת נציג פה עוד איזה כתיבות שיצאו מתחת ידי התועב הנ"ל:  
אלו החרוזים שהציג על מצבת אשתו מצבת און

אין מצבת כהפך לדיוולקניה עשיר'ה לפ"ק  
מצבת ראש נפלה ונחם לנב  
לית סן סרנניס סכמניס  
ונדקניס חרת עלקלי נח  
ג'וטר שלשלת היסם הנאון הנדול  
ב'ס'ס'נ'ס'ק שפירא ראש לקהל י  
לקומה לאשה לה'ה מהורר יהונסון  
אנ'ד דנ'ק אה'ו וגלילות ארץ  
ברב ושכיח  
זכות מעשה ועוץ פעלה לבלי  
מספר וחן  
לנדור סייס סלתה ותנוס יוקום  
נורא ושג'רא

3. *פתח עינים* (Altona, 1756), p. 16b. The passage appears here in facsimile, exactly as it appeared in the editio princeps.

Emden's point was that just as the enlarged letters on the right side of the inscription (starting with the *ayin* of עטרת) form the acrostic עלקל, so too the enlarged letters on its left side form the acrostic שבתי ן. Clearly, Eibeschuetz, the author of the epitaph, was proclaiming his Sabbatian belief for all to see.

Now the פתח עינים was published in Altona, and it was readily available to the members of the Jewish community. The claim it made was astonishing indeed. In effect, Emden claimed that the chief rabbi's heresy was engraved on Elkele Eibeschuetz's tombstone. All doubts could be quelled by a simple stroll through the cemetery. A cautious reader, perhaps a defender of Eibeschuetz, may wish to claim that Emden enlarged those letters on his own, as they appear in his transcription of the epitaph, thus creating the impression that there was a reference to Sabbetai Zevi on Elkele Eibeschuetz's tombstone. Such a claim, however, cannot be seriously entertained. Whatever else Emden may have been, he was not a fool. Anyone could enlarge the initial or final letters of consecutive words (or verses in Scripture) and derive the name שבתי צבי or almost any other name one wished to read into a text. Clearly, Emden was presenting a reasonably accurate transcription of the epitaph as it appeared on the tombstone, transcribing regular letters in regular-sized print and enlarged letters in large-sized print. To prove the point, we refer the reader to another reference to Elkele Eibeschuetz's epitaph in Emden's writings. In 1769, when Emden was in his seventies, he decided to publish ספר התאבקות which, for the most part, was a summary of all his previous works against Eibeschuetz. His account of Elkele Eibeschuetz's epitaph reads, in part, as follows:

In 1755, Eibeschuetz's wife died from breast cancer. . . . He had an epitaph inscribed on her tombstone, in which—by means of an acrostic—he alluded to the accursed Sabbetai Zevi. . . . He alluded to the year [of her death] by using the word שיר"ה. He enlarged the *shin* so that it would connect to the final letters of the words directly below it in a straight line.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the enlarged letters in Emden's transcription were enlarged on the tombstone itself. Thus, as late as 1769, some fifteen years after Elkele Eibeschuetz's death, Emden was still claiming that the chief rabbi's heresy was engraved on the tombstone for all to see.

In 1903, Eduard Duckesz, Klausrabbiner of Altona, published a history of

4. ספר התאבקות (Altona, 1769), p. 33b. For the full text, see below, n. 10.

the rabbis of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbeck.<sup>5</sup> It includes portraits and tombstone inscriptions. Elkele Eibeschuetz's epitaph is prominently displayed in full detail (see fig. 1).<sup>6</sup>

What is striking is the lack of any enlarged letters! Moreover, even if one were to enlarge the letters at the beginning and end of the lines, they would not spell either *עלקל* or *שבתי ץ*! The very same transcription of Elkele Eibeschuetz's epitaph appears in Zinz's definitive biography of Eibeschuetz, *גדולת יהונתן*.<sup>7</sup> Neither Duckesz nor Zinz makes mention of Emden's claims; nor, to the best of our knowledge, has anyone else in all the subsequent Jewish discussion of the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy.

At this point, we began to suspect a cover-up. If one examines the *פתח עינים* passage, it appears obvious that the enlarged letters on the right-hand side of the inscription spell out the deceased's first name *עלקל*, a common practice on tombstone inscriptions. There would be no reason for Emden to invent those particular *ראשי תבות* if they were not there in the first place. Moreover, it was Eibeschuetz's practice to write epitaphs precisely in this manner. Consider, for example, Eibeschuetz's own epitaph, which he wrote for himself (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> Note the enlarged letters in the right-hand column. They spell: *יהונתן ז"ל*. Thus, on a priori grounds, Emden's transcription seems more reasonable than that of Duckesz and Zinz. If, however, the original reading of the epitaph included the acrostic *שבתי ץ*, as Emden claimed, we must entertain the possibility, however bizarre, that supporters of Eibeschuetz went to the cemetery, redid the tombstone, made all the letters the same size, and rearranged the length of the lines so that the damaging acrostic disappeared. Presumably, Duckesz and Zinz copied the epitaph in its revised form, the only one available to them at the Koenigstrasse cemetery in Altona.<sup>9</sup>

As indicated, we suspected this, and worried about it, for if true, the proof of Eibeschuetz's guilt had once been carved on stone for all to see. That no such cover-up occurred, however, during the lifetime of either Eibeschuetz or Emden, can be proven from the writings of Emden himself. As mentioned above, in 1769, five years after Eibeschuetz's death, and almost fifteen years

5. *אזה למושב* (Cracow, 1903)

6. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

7. D. L. Zinz, *גדולת יהונתן* (Piotrkow, 1930), vol. 1, p. 126.

8. See Duckesz, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

9. Note too that the *yod* of *שבתי* (= the *yod* of *ל[ק]הל י'*) is lacking in Duckesz's and Zinz's transcriptions. Cf. below, n. 17.



Fig. 1. מצבת אשת הרה"ג וכו' מוהר"ר יהונתן אייבשיטץ זצ"ל





מצבת הרה"ג וכו' מוהר"ר יהונתן אייבשיטץ זצ"ל Fig.2.

after Elkele Eibeschuetz's death, Emden railed against Eibeschuetz once again for having carved Sabbetai Zevi's name on Elkele's epitaph. Had anyone introduced the slightest change in the text of the tombstone inscription, we can be certain that Emden would have reported it with great relish. Clearly, in 1769 the inscription read exactly as it did in 1755. And if no one saw fit to redo the inscription during Eibeschuetz's lifetime, it seems highly unlikely that such a change was introduced after his death or after the death of Emden. In any event, judging on the basis of his extant writings, Eibeschuetz never referred to this particular accusation, nor did he respond to it.

The testimony of Duckesz and Zinz was sufficiently troubling that the matter demanded further investigation. Much like the fabled medieval debate concerning how many teeth a horse has, which after much learned discussion and extensive citation from ancient tomes was resolved by examining a live horse's mouth, we set out for Altona and visited the Jewish cemetery on the Koenigstrasse, where Elkele Eibeschuetz rests in peace. Her tombstone still stands, and the epitaph is sufficiently legible for the matter to be laid to rest. First, by examining the shape, texture, and color of the tombstone and comparing it to the tombstones of her contemporaries buried in the same cemetery, it was quite obvious that this was the original tombstone. At first glance we were shocked, for the enlarged letters stared at us precisely as Emden had described them: they spelled out in large letters: שבתיץ. Alas, Emden did not tell the whole truth, at least in 1756 in the פתח עינים passage.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, his published account contains several rather misleading distortions. The inscription, as it stands today, reads:

10. Cf. the fuller (and more revealing) version in Emden, ספר התאבקות, p. 33b, which reads: בשנת תקט"ו מתה אשתו בחולי סרטן שאכל בשדיה אחר שחתכוה הרופאים את שדיה ינתק, והציג בעלה אייבשיצר שר"י חרוזים על מצבתה מצבת או"ן בו רמז בר"ת שם הארור שבתי צבי שר"י, והתנכל שיהיו נקראים ר"ת החרוזים גם על שם אשתו ואביה, ופרט השנה רמז בתיבת שיר"ה (תחת שירה קינה מבעי ליה) והשי"ן עשה גדולה כדי לצרפה לר"ת בתי הנמשכים אחריה בקו ישר, כדי לעשות זכר לשקוצו אשר חקוק על לוח לבו ולא ימוש מפיו בכל כתיבותיו, כנבחן בכל מה שיצא מת"י בכתב, יעוינו החרוזים בבית יהונתן (אולי חשבה לטובה להיות הפ"ק עולה עם הכולל למספר יונתן).

probably should read: את שרשיה ינתק, as in Ezekiel 17:9. Alternatively, Emden produced a conflate text based upon Ezekiel 23:34 (ושדיך תנתקי) and 17:9.

The reference to בית יהונתן [הסופר] (Altona, 1763) appears to be mistaken. The חרוזים appear in פתח עינים, p. 16b.

Elkele Eibeschuetz's epitaph is mentioned in passing in Emden's שבירת לוחות האון (Altona, 1756), p. 14a. An abridged version of the epitaph appears in E. M. Pinner, מצבות קברות הרבנים ואנשי השם (Berlin, 1861), p. 94.





letters are aligned, one atop the other, exactly as they appear on the tombstone. What needs to be noted is the following:

1. The enlarged letters read: עלקלי ז"ל בת יצחק שפירא. Emden conveniently forgot to enlarge the ז"ל and חק, leaving only the letters ש בתי in large print on the left side of the inscription.<sup>11</sup>
2. The enlarged letters at the top of the inscription spell out שיר"ה, i.e., the Jewish year [5]515 = 1755. Emden enlarged only the ש, whereas in fact the entire word שיר"ה is enlarged on the tombstone. He, of course, wanted to create the impression that ש בתי was to be read.
3. Most revealing, Emden aligned the letters ש בתי so that they appear in a straight line, one directly under the other. In his 1769 account, he states unabashedly: והשי"ן עשה גדולה כדי לצרפה לראשי חיבות בתי הנמשכים אחריה בקו. ישר.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the ש does not rest above the ב at all!

Eibeschuetz chose not to respond to this particular accusation, probably because no response was necessary. In this instance, it is perhaps appropriate to say about Emden: לפי שבא לכלל כעס, בא לכלל טעות.<sup>13</sup> Then again, one never knows for sure. Emden developed highly sensitive antennae that could detect Sabbatian influences where no one else suspected them. His radarlike capabilities in this area have in recent years been proven correct again and again. Emden may have wondered why the first line read: יוד טבת נהפך לדוי ולקינה. שיר"ה לפ"ק. The Tenth of Teveth is always a day of קינה and דוי. In eighteenth-century Sabbatian teaching, however, the Tenth of Teveth was a holiday.<sup>14</sup> Only someone who ordinarily celebrated the Tenth of Teveth would refer to it as a day that נהפך לדוי ולקינה due to a death in the family. Why would anyone select שיר"ה as an appropriate substitute for (and numerical equivalent of) the Jewish year on a tombstone? Surely, חקט"ו would have done admirably. Is it possible that Sabbetai Zevi, often referred to as אמיר"ה (אדוננו מלכנו ירום הודו), was here referred to as שיר"ה (שבתי ירום הודו)?<sup>15</sup> And how would R. Jonathan

11. More precisely, Emden forgot to enlarge the ז"ל, and indicated its lower-case status by printing it in so-called Rashi script. He enlarged the חק (and even the final *mem* of the word מקום at the end of the next line) ever so slightly, and indicated its capital status by printing it in block letters. This may have been an attempt to cover himself in case of a challenge (as to why he didn't present חק in large print). Nonetheless, Emden's transcription, which clearly distinguishes (in type size) between ש בתי and חק, is misleading, to say the least.

12. See above n. 10.

13. *Sifre to Numbers*, § 157, ed. H. S. Horovitz, p. 213.

14. See, e.g., A. Freimann, עניני שבתי צבי (Berlin, 1912), p. 96.

15. It is perhaps noteworthy that the Jewish year is referred to as שיר"ה on the title page of

Eibeschuetz have responded? No doubt, he would have explained that what he intended to say was that on the Tenth of Teveth, the day his wife died, the year *שיר"ה* turned into *דוי* and *קינה*.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, at least with regard to the epitaph of Elkele Eibeschuetz, Eibeschuetz was the victor in the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy. No court would convict Eibeschuetz of heresy on the basis of the very thin and distorted evidence put forward by his adversary, Emden.<sup>17</sup>

This inquiry, however modest, has enabled us to enter Emden's workshop. Despite his general penchant for accuracy, the transcription he published was not an accurate one. Letters that should have been enlarged were not enlarged; other letters were improperly aligned. And all it took to disprove Emden was a stroll in the cemetery. One suspects that Emden simply published a hand-copy—prepared by others—of the epitaph. Throughout the controversy, Emden relied on hearsay and on materials submitted to him by others.<sup>18</sup> Apparently, he did not bother to verify the accuracy of hearsay

Eibeschuetz's *לוחת עדות* (Altona, 1755). There, however, its usage is beyond cavil. Cf. a similar usage by Emden, *שבירת לוחות האון*, p. 36a.

16. If this is the correct sense, one would have preferred the feminine form *נהפכה*; but anyone familiar with Eibeschuetz's general disregard for the niceties of grammar will not want to press the point. If one insists on flawless grammar, it is possible that the first line consists of a couplet: *יוד טבת נהפך לדוי/ולקינה שיר"ה*. The first half of the couplet could mean that the Tenth of Teveth, ordinarily a mere fast-day, was transformed into a day of deep pain and distress (*דוי*) due to the death of Elkele Eibeschuetz. The second half of the couplet could then be understood as follows: On the Tenth of Teveth, the day Elkele Eibeschuetz died, the year *שיר"ה* turned into *קינה*. Alternatively, *שיר"ה* can be read with a *ה* *מפיק*, and the entire line rendered as one stich: "On the Tenth of Teveth, her [i.e., Elkele's] song was transformed into a painful dirge." I am indebted to Professor Warren Harvey for this latter interpretation.

17. What remains to be explained is the curious transcription of Elkele Eibeschuetz's epitaph in Duckesz (and Zinz). That it is erroneous is clear from the fact that it lacks the acrostic *עלקלי*, despite its appearance in Emden's transcription and its presence on the tombstone to this very day. Also, it lacks the *yod* necessary for the acrostic *יצחק*. The most likely explanation is that Duckesz (or his copyist) collapsed the original thirteen-line inscription (starting with *עטרת*) into an eleven-line inscription, in order to economize on space. The original inscription included four half-sized lines; these were collapsed into two full-sized lines, leaving no empty spaces on Duckesz's transcription. In rearranging the lines, the acrostics disappeared, including (by accident) the *yod*, which no longer was essential for the inscription. Alternatively, it is remotely possible that the "cover-up" was initiated by Duckesz in order to counteract Emden's claims. This, however, would appear to be highly unlikely.

18. See, e.g., Emden's *תורת הקנאות* (Amsterdam, 1752), p. 60a, where he included Meir Geller of Frankfurt am Main on a list of confirmed Sabbatians masquerading as rabbis and as pious Jews. Emden explained that a pious and God-fearing resident of Amsterdam had provided him with the list. Seventeen years later, in his *ספר התאבקות*, p. 75a–b, Emden admitted that he had

brought to his attention or of the materials that were submitted to him. He published the accounts exactly as he heard or received them. In effect, Emden became his own worst enemy, for he kept tripping over himself. Had he confined himself to publishing the established facts alone, he would have been taken seriously by all or most of his readers. It was precisely his obvious distortions and exaggerations (among them the claim that Eibeschuetz was an *am ha-arez*) that pulled the rug out from under the feet of his credibility.<sup>19</sup>

Legend has it that on his deathbed, as his soul was departing, Emden was heard greeting his father, R. Zvi Ashkenazi, author of *שו"ת חכם צבי*.<sup>20</sup> This was immediately followed by Emden's last words as a mortal: "Greetings, R. Jonathan." Upon his death, the burial society convened to settle on an appropriate gravesite for Emden's burial. In the rabbinical section of the cemetery on the Koenigstrasse in Altona, there was only one empty plot, some five graves away from that of Eibeschuetz. The members of the burial society were not prepared to bury these two lifelong enemies in proximity to each other. By chance, R. Ezekiel Landau of Prague happened to be visiting Altona at the time, and was asked to decide the issue. He ruled that since Emden and Eibeschuetz had finally made peace with each other—as evidenced by Emden's having greeted Eibeschuetz in his dying breath—it was appropriate that they be buried near each other.<sup>21</sup> Anyone who visits the Altona cemetery will be able to attest to the fact that at least the last part of the legend is true. R. Jacob Emden is buried next to his (third) wife, *צביה רחל*; R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz is buried next to his wife, Elkele. Both couples rest in peace in the same row, some five graves apart from each other.<sup>22</sup>

erred; Geller was not a Sabbatian! He apologized publicly, and asked that the offensive passage be blotted out from all copies of *תורת הקנאות*.

19. See, e.g., *שבירת לוחות האן*, p. 33a.

20. The *חכם צבי* died in 1718. The imagery here is that of the departing soul of Emden greeting the souls on high.

21. The legend was recounted by R. Sholom of Stropkov, son of R. Yehezkel of Shinova (d. 1899), and recorded by A. Michaelson, *אהל אברהם* (Piotrkow, 1911 [reissued: New York, 1964], p. 56).

22. This paper has benefited from the insightful comments of my colleague, Professor David Berger, to whom I am deeply grateful.