
Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschuetz's Attitude towards the Frankists

SID Z. LEIMAN

THE Emden–Eibeschuetz controversy erupted on the fateful Thursday morning of 4 February 1751, when Rabbi Jacob Emden announced in his synagogue in Altona that an amulet ascribed to the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Eibeschuetz, could only have been written by a secret believer in Shabbetai Tsevi. The controversy between these two rabbinic titans continued unabated until Eibeschuetz's death in 1764. Even after his death Emden continued to wage the battle against Eibeschuetz's memory and against his descendants and disciples until his own death in 1776. After Emden's death the controversy entered a new, scholastic phase, in which historians took turns condemning or defending either Emden or Eibeschuetz. There appears to be no imminent danger that these polemics will abate in the twenty-first century.

At the height of the controversy, between 1755 and 1760, Jakub Frank revealed himself in Podolia, assumed leadership of the Shabbatean movement in Ukraine, Galicia, Wielkopolska, and Hungary, and presided over the Shabbatean teachings enunciated at the public disputations between the Frankists and the talmudists in Kamenets-Podolsk in 1757 and in Lviv in 1759. During the Lviv disputation—perhaps the most notorious in all of Jewish history—the Frankists publicly proclaimed that the Talmud teaches that Jews require Christian blood for ritual purposes, and that whoever believes in the Talmud must consume Christian blood on Passover. The fact that the Frankists were currying favour with the Christian authorities, and engaging in a heinous act of collusion in order to save their own skins, does not for one moment mitigate the scandal of Jew accusing fellow Jew of blood libel, particularly at a time when some Church officials relished the blood libel and were leading innocent Jews to their deaths.¹

The scandalous news from Poland spread quickly. Newspapers and periodicals were widespread by the middle of the eighteenth century, and the disputations at Kamenets-Podolsk and Lviv, the burning of the Talmud, and the blood libel were

¹ See Majer Bałaban, *Letoledot hatenuah hafrankit*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1934–5). For details of the blood libel in 18th-century Poland, see Z. Guldon and J. Wijaczka, 'The Accusation of Ritual Murder in Poland, 1500–1800', *Polin*, 10 (1997), 99–140. For details of the blood libel in general, see R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder* (New Haven, 1988), esp. the bibliographical references cited on p. 2 n. 3.

reported in great detail. Even aside from the accounts in the Polish, German, and French media, Jews in Poland alerted fellow Jews the world over about the potential disasters: the willing conversion of the Frankists and the forced conversion of the talmudic Jews in the light of the Frankist allegations.

At the time Altona belonged to the Kingdom of Denmark but functioned largely as a bedroom community for Jews working in neighbouring Hamburg in northern Germany. Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschuetz of Altona, who was perhaps the most distinguished talmudist of the eighteenth century, presided over the leading talmudic academy in Europe. Moreover, renowned for his keen mind, broad knowledge, and ready wit, Eibeschuetz was also well connected to Christian theologians and European royal houses. In his youth he spent a great deal of time in Jesuit circles in Prague and at the royal court in Vienna. He frequently debated with Christian missionaries, and he is mentioned prominently in missionary literature from the 1730s and 1740s as 'the only Jewish scholar of note in Prague. He asks difficult questions; it often takes two to three days of research on the part of the priests in order to answer his questions!'²

If ever the sage advice of Eibeschuetz were needed, it was needed now in Poland. How did one respond to the Frankist allegations, especially when many of the stated Frankist positions (for example, regarding trinitarian belief) were deliberately presented as imitations of Christian positions? Any critique of Frankism by the talmudists was bound to antagonize the judges of the dispute, who, after all, were Christians. Where was Eibeschuetz during the Frankist disputes with the talmudists? No one asked this question more frequently and more derisively than Rabbi Jacob Emden. In a typical passage Emden writes:

Eibeschuetz too was informed of the grave danger to the Jewish people and to Jewish belief, and of the threatened annulment of the divine Torah, heaven forbid. His disciples and admirers urged him to stand in the breach, for they said his words would certainly be well received by the [Christian] authorities. They spread his fame throughout the world, claiming that no one else in this generation could respond to heretics as well as he. They entreated him in writing and orally to address the crisis confronting the Jewish people, and to provide leadership for this great and momentous undertaking. When he was at Breslau at his daughter's wedding [in 1759],³ a delegation of Jews from Poland requested that he join them. They promised to pay him handsomely for his efforts and to provide for all his expenses. He turned them down, as if it were a matter of no concern to him. In truth he rejoiced at the news [coming from Poland], for he was a collaborator with Frank and his sect. This only became known afterwards, from informants in Poland, who swore that they saw letters that Eibeschuetz and his family exchanged with the accursed Frankists in Poland, letters that indicated that Eibeschuetz and the Frankists were in full agreement with each other.⁴

² See G. Scholem, 'Yediot al hashatbeta'im besifrei hamisyonerim beme'ah ha-18', *Zion*, 9 (1944), 34 n. 42.

³ Eibeschuetz's daughter Nissel married Raphael Gad at Breslau in 1759. See B. Brilling, 'Eibenschütziana', *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 35 (1964), 268.

⁴ Jacob Emden, *Hitavlut* (Altona, 1769), 35a.

Emden never tired of repeating this accusation, which he incorporated into almost all of his polemical tracts published after 1760.⁵ Emden, of course, was an involved party, and it comes as no surprise that he accused his arch-enemy of being at once a heretic and a traitor. More surprising is the stance of Heinrich Graetz, who, in the final version of his magisterial history, wrote as follows:

Regarding all these calamitous events, Jonathan Eibeschuetz was in some measure to blame. The Frankists regarded him, the great *gaon* [genius], as one of themselves, and he did nothing to clear himself of the stigma of this suspicion. He was implored to aid the Polish Jews, to make his influence felt in refuting the charge of the use of Christian blood. He remained silent, as if he feared to provoke the Frankists against himself.⁶

Graetz, of course, was persuaded by Emden. And if the great talmudist Eibeschuetz, who was born in Poland, was silent in the face of charges that the Talmud not only condones but requires the consumption of Christian blood, he surely was a charlatan and a Shabbatean sympathizer at the very least.

Benedict Zuckermann,⁷ who taught mathematics and served as librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, died in 1891; his library was bequeathed to the seminary, and it included a manuscript in German signed by Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschuetz and dated 22 December 1759.⁸ Although the signature and the paragraph preceding it were written in Eibeschuetz's own hand, the remainder of the document was in a different hand, presumably that of a copyist. It would appear, then, that much of the document was a copy of the original. The original manuscript was probably addressed to the Danish government, and was ultimately intended for Church authorities in either Rome or Lviv. The document preserved by Zuckermann contained three expert opinions on blood libel. It opened with the opinion of Eibeschuetz, who solicited two further opinions from Christian scholars. These were the distinguished professors of theology and oriental languages at the University of Halle, Christian Benedict Michaelis (1680–1764)⁹ and Johann Salomo Semler (1729–91).¹⁰ Eibeschuetz understood that nothing a rabbi said would carry

⁵ See e.g. *Sefer shimush* (Altona, 1758–62), 22b, 85b, 86a–b, 87b. Cf. *Beit yehonatan hasofer* (Altona, 1763), 17b, §120.

⁶ H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, 11 vols. (Leipzig, 1897), x. 403. The original German reads as follows: 'An allen diesen trübseligen Ereignissen hatte Jonathan Eibeschütz einige Schuld. Die Frankisten zählten ihn, den grossen Gaon, zu den ihrigen und er tat nichts, um diesen brandmarkenden Verdacht von sich abzuwälzen. Er wurde angefleht, der Not der polnischen Juden beizuspringen, seinen Einfluss geltend zu machen, der Anschuldigung vom Gebrauch des Christenblutes entgegenzutreten. Er blieb stumm, als fürchtete er, die Frankisten gegen sich zu reizen.'

⁷ See the entry on Zuckermann in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (New York, 1912), xii. 698. For a portrait of Zuckermann, see M. Łagiewski, *Breslauer Juden. 1850–1944* (Wrocław, 1996), portrait 82.

⁸ The Frankist claim that the Talmud teaches that Jews require Christian blood for ritual purposes was officially recorded—and made public—on 25 May 1759. The public disputation between the Frankists and the Polish rabbis on the blood libel took place between 27 Aug. and 10 Sept. 1759. See Bałaban, *Letoledot hatenuah hafrankit*, ii. 209, 241–66.

⁹ On Michaelis, see *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie*, 56 vols. (Leipzig, 1875–1912), xxi. 676.

¹⁰ On Semler, see F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, 1966), 1239.

much weight with the authorities in Rome or Lviv. What was needed was the testimony of Christian scholars who had mastered Hebrew and could weigh the evidence adduced by Eibeschuetz. Eibeschuetz wrote a brilliant refutation of the Frankist allegation that the Talmud teaches that Jews must consume Christian blood. Michaelis and Semler appended letters of approval, attesting to the soundness of Eibeschuetz's refutation. Moreover, Semler appended a lengthy dissertation proving that the blood libel was and is a fraud, adducing Christian sources from the Church Fathers onwards.¹¹ Our concern here, however, is with Eibeschuetz's expert opinion. His opening paragraph reads:

It is not only with great dismay, but also with great pain, that I was informed that certain ungodly and unprincipled persons—long since banned from the Jewish synagogue—have banded together. And in order to cover up their depravity, and in order to belittle the Jewish people in the eyes of the Christian authorities, they have adduced falsified and imaginary passages from Jewish literature, which allegedly indicate that Jews require Christian blood for their ritual ceremonies.¹²

There follows a point-by-point rebuttal of every so-called 'proof' of the Frankist position. Eibeschuetz's arguments are lucid and persuasive. If one compares his answers with those actually given at the dispute, there is no contest. Eibeschuetz was more profound and erudite than his rabbinic colleagues in Lviv. He had the advantage, of course, of responding at leisure, and not while in the line of fire. Eibeschuetz also sprinkled his comments with appropriate proofs from Josephus and Christian sources, something the rabbis in Lviv could not do. Eibeschuetz repeatedly refers to the Frankists as godless scoundrels.

Following are some samples of Eibeschuetz's rebuttal of Frankist arguments:

i. The Frankists cited from the sixteenth-century Jewish code of law, *Shulhan arukh* ('Orah hayim' 472: 11), that it is obligatory to use red wine at the Passover meal. They then cited the *Turei zahav*, a seventeenth-century commentary on the code by Rabbi David ben Samuel Halevi of Lviv (1586–1667),¹³ who wrote that red wine was preferable because the colour alludes to the Jewish blood shed by

¹¹ The Zuckermann manuscript was published in two instalments by M. Brann. See his 'Zwei christliche Zeugnisse gegen die Blutlüge', *Jahrbuch zur Belehrung und Unterhaltung*, 40 (1892), 79–109, and his 'Ein deutsches Gutachten des Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschütz', *Jahrbuch zur Belehrung und Unterhaltung*, 44 (1896), 46–65.

¹² Brann, 'Ein deutsches Gutachten', 50. The original German reads as follows: 'Ich habe nicht allein mit dem grössten Verdrusse, sondern auch mit der grössten Wehmuth vernehmen müssen, wie dass sich einige Gottlose, Ehrvergessene Leute, so längstens aus der Jüdischen Synagoge verbannt worden, zusammen gerottet, und um ihre Laster zu bedecken, die Jüdische Nation bey der Christlichen Hohen Obrigkeit zu verkleinern, und mit grundlosen, ja gantz falschen Sätzen, aus jüdischen Büchern zu behaupten gesucht, als wenn die jüdische Nation zu ihren Haupt Ceremonien Christen-Blut von nöthen hätte.'

¹³ On Rabbi David ben Samuel Halevi, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (Jerusalem, 1971), v. 1354.

Pharaoh in Egypt. These citations, claimed the Frankists, proved that Jews must drink Christian blood on Passover. How so? The Frankists explained that nowhere in Scripture is there mention of Jewish blood shed by Pharaoh in Egypt. Thus, all these citations are really a secret code whose true meaning is: Jews are required to drink Christian blood on Passover.¹⁴

Now both Rabbi Hayim Hakohen Rapoport¹⁵ (who participated in the disputation at Lviv) and Eibeschuetz were quick to note that the first quotation was cited by the Frankists out of context. The full passage reads that red wine is preferable when it is a better wine. In locations where white wines tend to be better than red wines, white wine is preferable.¹⁶ Thus, it is not the colour of the wine but the quality of the wine that is decisive. What has this to do with blood? Regarding the second citation, Rapoport answered that it is clear from Exodus 1: 22 ('Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw in the Nile, but let every girl live" ') that Pharaoh shed Jewish blood. This was certainly a clever answer, for it pointed to a verse in Scripture that the Christian judges could not deny. But it was also a contrived answer, for this was surely not what Rabbi David ben Samuel Halevi had in mind. Drowning victims in water is not quite the same as shedding blood. Moreover, the imagery is wrong. One would hardly commemorate the death of victims drowned in water by drinking red wine.

Here Eibeschuetz was more forthcoming.¹⁷ He explained that Rabbi David ben Samuel Halevi was alluding to the midrashic sources¹⁸ (cited by Rashi in his commentary on the Torah¹⁹), describing Pharaoh's need to bathe in the blood of Jewish first-born children. This was the midrashic response to why all Egyptian first-born died in the Tenth Plague. It was measure for measure; what Pharaoh did to the Israelite first-born was done to the Egyptian first-born. Eibeschuetz cleverly cited the version of this midrash that appears in the Targum of Exodus 2: 23, and then added in a rhetorical flourish: 'Read the register of permitted books, as established by the Council of Trent. You will find Targum listed under the letter T. Thus, the Church recognizes this book as trustworthy.'

2. The Frankists cited the Passover Haggadah, where the Ten Plagues are listed, and where it is the custom to spill ten drops of wine from the cup, one for each of the plagues. The Haggadah continues: Rabbi Judah abbreviated them thus: *detsakh, adash, be'ahav*. The Frankists noted that the rabbis explain the abbreviations as an acrostic formed from the first letters of each of the Ten Plagues. But, claimed the

¹⁴ For the text of the Frankist argument, see Bałaban, *Letoledot hatenuah hafrankit*, ii. 246–50.

¹⁵ On Rapoport (1700–71), see *Jewish Encyclopedia*, x. 321.

¹⁶ See Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (d. 1230), *Sefer haroke'ah* (Jerusalem, 1967), 153 (Laws of Passover, §283). ¹⁷ Brann, 'Ein deutsches Gutachten', 57.

¹⁸ See *Exodus Rabbah* 1: 34 and parallels. Cf. L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia, 1955), v. 412–13 n. 101; and M. Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 45 vols. (New York, 1944), ix. 102–3 n. 180.

¹⁹ See Rashi's commentary on Exod. 2: 23.

Frankists, the acrostic actually consists of the first letters of a coded message which reads (in translation): 'We all need blood, just as was done to Jesus in Jerusalem.' The code was written in three words to allude to the Holy Trinity; and the message really means that Jews must consume Christian blood.²⁰

Rabbi Hayim Hakohen Rapoport responded that the plagues are also listed at Psalm 78: 44–51. The order of the plagues there differs from the order in Exodus. Rabbi Judah, by means of his abbreviations, signalled that the order in Exodus is the preferred one.²¹ Once again, a clever answer, but hardly the correct one. Eibeschuetz was more thorough in demolishing this ridiculous claim of the Frankists.²² First, he noted that anyone can take the initial letters of any series of words and make up whatever message they wish. Why should anyone believe the Frankist reading of the abbreviations?²³ Secondly, even if one accepts their reading, it is a non sequitur. If 'what was done to Jesus' means crucifixion, as it must, what has this to do with Jews drinking blood? Thirdly, it is quite easy to explain what Rabbi Judah did. In antiquity, when print did not exist, mnemonic devices were used in order to remember itemized lists. Rabbi Judah introduced similar mnemonic devices elsewhere in the Talmud.²⁴ Closing with a flourish, Eibeschuetz noted that such was the practice of Pythagoras as well.

To the best of our knowledge, the Zuckermann manuscript did not survive the Second World War.²⁵ Fortunately, it was published in an obscure journal at the turn of the century by Marcus Brann, Graetz's successor as professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau.²⁶ In effect, we are resuscitating a forgotten, neglected, but significant essay published by Brann over 100 years ago.

We have no way of knowing whether these expert opinions reached the higher authorities in Rome or Lviv, and whether or not they exerted any influence on the outcome of the Lviv dispute. What is known is that Mikulicz Mikulski, who orchestrated the Lviv disputation, and who originally looked with favour on the blood libel, began to waver, in part because of the opposition of the higher Church authorities. Perhaps Eibeschuetz's testimony, and those of Michaelis and Semler, played a role after all. More importantly, Emden's and Graetz's condemnations of

²⁰ The Frankists deciphered the Hebrew abbreviations as follows: *Dam tserikhim kulanu al derekh she'asu be'oto ish hakhamim biyerushalayim*; lit. 'We all need blood in the way the sages did to that man in Jerusalem'. For the Frankist argument, see Bałaban, *Letoledot hatenuah hafrankit*, ii. 248.

²¹ This account of Rabbi Judah's abbreviations had already been suggested in the medieval period. See M. Kasher, *Hagadah shelema* (Jerusalem, 1967), 51, §278; cf. 'Perush hameyuhas lerashi', in *Hagadah shel pesah torat hayim* (Jerusalem, 1998), 120–1.

²² Brann, 'Ein deutsches Gutachten', 60.

²³ Cf. M. B. Justman, *Me'otsareinu hayashan*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem, 1980), iv. 110.

²⁴ See e.g. BT *Menahot* 96a.

²⁵ It is listed in D. S. Loewinger and B. D. Weinryb, *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Library of the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar in Breslau* (Wiesbaden, 1965), 183, §261.

²⁶ For Marcus Brann (1849–1920), see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, iv. 1307–8. His portrait appears in Łagiewski, *Breslauer Juden*, portrait 89.

Eibeschuetz need to be reconsidered in the light of evidence about which they apparently knew nothing.²⁷

It has not been the purpose of this chapter to address the larger issue of whether Eibeschuetz was in fact a Shabbatean. In the light of the evidence presented above, this much appears to be certain: he could not tolerate the radical Shabbateanism of Jakub Frank, as it manifested itself in the catechism prepared by the Frankists for the Lviv disputation in 1759. Particularly offensive was the blatant Frankist validation of the blood libel before the very eyes of the Christian authorities. Eibeschuetz orchestrated an interdenominational response that demolished the Frankist claim persuasively and effectively.

²⁷ Note, too, that Eibeschuetz issued a series of oral and written bans against Shabbateans and their teaching. For the text of an oral ban issued by him in 1751, see his *Luhot edut* (Altona, 1755), 77b. For the text of a written ban issued by him in 1755, see S. Eidelberg, 'Gilgulav shel hara'ayon hameshihi bein yehudei germaniyah', in S. Nash (ed.), *Bein historiyah lesifrut: sefer yovel leyitshak barzilai* (Tel Aviv, 1997), 48. For the text of a written ban issued by him in 1761, see D. L. Zinz, *Gedulat yehonatan* (Piotrków, 1930), i. 100–1.