

Rabbi Daniel Zion z"l

The Chief Rabbi of Bulgarian Jews During World War II

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The first record of Jews in Sofia, Bulgaria, is from 811 A.D. Before that time the center of Jewish life, which has a continuous existence in Bulgaria since the early days of the Roman Empire, was in the city of Vidin. Jews came to Sofia with the return of Krum, the victorious king, who brought to Sofia some 30,000 prisoners, among whom there were also many Jews from Asia Minor. To these Jews were added also Jews who ran away from the persecution in Hungary, and Austria.

When King Muad I conquered Sofia in 1389, he found four synagogues active in the city. There was a synagogue named, "Kehal de los Griegos", which was used by the Jews which came to Sofia from Greece and the Greek Islands. There was also an Ashkenazi synagogue, and a "Frankish" synagogue, and the fourth synagogue was for the local Jews who worshiped in Bulgarian and Hebrew. When Pope Nickolai 5th. persecuted the Jews in Bavaria, many of these Jews came to Sofia and mixed with the local and the Greek Jews who spoke Ladino. This Bulgarian Jewish community developed strong connections with the large Sephardic community in Thessalonika, Greece. In Thessalonika there was a large Jewish community which had a Yeshiva (Rabbinical School). Thessalonika was a center and it had all the Jewish institutions which were missing in Sofia at that time. When Bulgaria was liberated from Turkish domination in the year 1880, prince Alexander of Bulgaria nominated Rabbi Gavriel Almoslino to be the chief Rabbi of Sofia, and Bulgaria. After the Balkan War 1912 many thousands of Jews immigrated into Bulgaria and the community grew and there was need for more Rabbis. In 1918 a message went from Sofia to Thessalonika to send Rabbis. The head of the Yeshiva in Thessalonika sent his young son, Daniel to serve the community in Sofia. Rabbi Daniel Zion served the community and was elected to be the chief Rabbi of Bulgaria. Rabbi Daniel Zion's major accomplishment was his activity during the war years.

With the beginning of the World War II began also the problems for the Jews. On Jan. 23rd., 1941, the Law for the Protection of the Nation was published in the official paper. This law was nothing more than a Bulgarian adaptation of the Neurenberg laws. The purpose of this law was to separate the Jewish community from the rest of the Bulgarian people and to limit the freedom of the Jews. On 1st. of March, 1941, the Bulgarian government announced that they were joining the Axis Powers. On the same day German Nazi forces entered Bulgaria without a single shot. It was stated officially that the Germans came into Bulgaria to protect it from a possible attack of the Allied forces from the East. On the same day an edict was published that every male Jew between 20 and 40 years old must report to Work Brigades. In reality these Work Brigades were labor camps. On 12th. of July, 1941, King Boris III, signed a law which ordered every Jew to pay "a Contribution Tax". In the same month, on the 29th. day, a second law was passed that limited the financial resources of the Jews in Bulgaria. This law prohibited Jews from being such things as, Pharmacist, Engineers, Architects, Lawyers... etc. In Sept. 30th., 1942, a special commission for Jewish affairs was appointed, and headed by one well known anti-semitic, Alexander Balev. These developments were in preparation for the extermination of Bulgarian Jews, and they all knew it.

The Jews of Bulgaria, and specially Sofia, stood at the edge of Hell twice in the year 1943. The government of Bulgaria made a decision under the German pressure to send the Jews outside of Bulgaria. On May 23rd. Rabbi Daniel Zion gathered all the Jews in the central synagogue of Sofia, which is the second largest synagogue in all of Europe. Every Jew in the city came to the synagogue to pray for the evil decision to be reversed. Rabbi Daniel said publicly to all the community, 'It is better for us to die here than in Poland'. When the Jews came out of the synagogue the Police attacked the multitude with truncheons and arrested about 250 men. The people continued to march toward the Holy Synod and demanded to see the Metropolitite Stephen, who was respected by the Jewish community because of friendly attitude toward them. The Metropolitite Stephen promised the Jewish community that he will meet with the King and the ministers and attempt to influence them to change their attitude and stop the persecution of the Jews. However, on May 25th. 1943, the expulsion of the Jews from Sofia began. The Commission for Jewish affairs took from Sofia into the provincial cities 10,153 Jews, and 3,500 men into the labor camps. In Sofia remained only 2,300 Jews. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church was one of the major stumbling blocks in the way of the Bulgarian Government to send the Jews to Auschwitz. The Church continued to intercede with the King and the rest of the cabinet for the Jews.

The question is asked way was the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria so amicable to the Jews? The real reason lays in the special relationship that the Metropolitite Stephen and Rabbi Daniel Zion shared with one another.

Rabbi Daniel Zion was invited in the early 1930's to visit Dunnov, who was a teacher of mystic type Christianity. This Dunnov was mixing mysticism and Christianity with Vegetarianism and some Yoga type exercise. Rabbi Daniel was impressed with the life style of this Dunnov, and started to implement some of the teachings of this mystic. There were three things which Rabbi Daniel Zion appropriated from Dunnov, Vegetarianism, getting up early in the morning and starting the day with prayer looking at the Sunrise, and daily physical exercise each day. Dunnov did speak of Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. He also spoke of the simple life style of the early disciples of Jesus. These subjects were eye openers for Rabbi Daniel. He started to think in what could be called from a Orthodox Jewish view point as un-orthodox, or at least unusual subjects for a Rabbi to think about. But, according to Rabbi Daniel Zion, the major change came into his life when as he was praying looking at the sunrise a vision of Yeshua appeared to him. He did not know what this vision meant. So he asked some of the other Rabbis what he should do about it. After the third time that the same vision reappeared Rabbi Daniel turned toward the figure and spoke to him. The figure was scintillating right out from the Sun and the impression that Rabbi Daniel received from this figure is that it spoke back to him identifying himself as Yeshua. It is no small thing for a Rabbi to receive a vision of Yeshua the Messiah. But, Rabbi Daniel Zion was well versed with the teaching, "Receive the truth by whomever it might come". He understood that there is something very special in this person who appeared to him. It was not regular message that was delivered to him. The total bizarre nature of this vision forced the Rabbi to investigate and try to understand what God was positioning before him. Rabbi Daniel Zion knew that he has to find a source of information that would help him deal with this vision and discern its meaning. At this point Rabbi Daniel went to the patriarchate of the Greek orthodox Church in Sofia and befriended the Archimandrite Stephen with whom they had a close friendship and a frank exchange of ideas on a variety of spiritual subjects including Jesus and the early church. The Patriarch, who was well versed in the delicate relationship between Jews and Christians, only encouraged the Rabbi to forget about Christianity and concentrate on Yeshua himself.

Rabbi Daniel never converted to “Christianity” he started to believe in Yeshua and remained faithful to the Torah keeping life style. A song that Rabbi Daniel wrote about his faith can probably best express his attitude toward Yeshua the Messiah:

No not I, No not I, only you are Yeshua in me!
 Only you bring me before the God of my fathers,
 Only you can heal me from every evil illness,
 No not I, No not I, only you are Yeshua in me!
 Only you teach me to love all creation,
 Only you teach me to love even the enemy,
 No not I, No not I, only you are Yeshua in me!
 For this reason I will stay in your love,
 For ever will I be within your will,
 No not I, No not I, only you are Yeshua in me!

Rabbi Daniel started to collect a very select small group of Jewish people to study the New Testament each Saturday afternoon in his house. Among these Jews were some of the leading members of the Jewish community in Sofia.

Rabbi Daniel's faith in Yeshua the Messiah became a well know secret in the Jewish community of Bulgaria. However his position was so honored and his services so highly esteemed that none of the Jewish functionaries in Sofia could openly criticize the Rabbi. And because he remained well within the framework of the Jewish community in Bulgaria and did not stop living as an Orthodox Jew in all the rigor of the strictest observance of the Torah there was little that his opponents could point as heresy. In the background of things the leadership of the Jewish community started to isolate him slowly.

When the Nazi Germany occupied Bulgaria without shooting one shot, Rabbi Daniel Zion as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community became the object of persecution and ridicule. He was taken and publicly flogged in front of the Great Synagogue of Sofia. During these times Rabbi Daniel walked upright before the fascists and his only reaction was to call upon God. My own mother and sister were present in at least two of these occasions and they retold this story many times. The sentiments which they felt years later from this experience gave them the feeling that they are proud to be Jews. When there was talk of shipping the Jews to Germany, Rabbi Daniel and his secretary A. A. Anski wrote a letter to the King of Bulgaria. In this letter Rabbi Daniel begged the King in the name of Yeshua not to allow the Jews to be taken out of Bulgaria. Rabbi Daniel wrote in this letter that in a vision that he had seen Yeshua told him to warn the King from delivering the Jews to the Nazis. After a long ordeal of waiting many hours at the door of the King's palace in Sofia, the Rabbi and his secretary were able to deliver this letter to the King's secretary. On the next day the King was going to Germany for a meeting with the Nazi Government and Hitler himself. King Boris of Bulgaria stood his ground and did not submit to the Nazi pressure to deliver the Jews from Bulgaria to the death camps of Poland and Germany.

Here are words from the sermon of Rabbi Daniel Zion on the Sabbath after he visited the King's palace and delivered the letter:

Fear not my dear brothers and sisters! Put your faith in the Holy Rock of our Salvation. . . Yesterday, I

have been informed that the Metropolite Stephen has agreed to see me immediately and discuss about his conversation with the King of Bulgaria. When I went to see the Metropolite Stephen, he told me, 'Tell your people that the King has promised that the Bulgarian Jews will not leave outside the borders of Bulgaria'. . . I explained to the Metropolite that thousands of Jews are waiting for me in the Synagogue to hear this good news. When I returned to the Synagogue there was full silence in the large crowd that was gathered waiting to hear the results of my meeting with Stephen. As I walked in my announcement was, "Yes my brothers God has heard our prayers". . .

On the 9th of September 1944, the fascist Government of Bulgaria fell and the Communist, under the patronage of Russia. Rabbi Daniel Zion remained the leader and the chief Rabbi of Bulgaria until 1949 when he with most of the Bulgarian Jewish community immigrated to Israel.

In Israel Rabbi Daniel was immediately accepted as the Rabbi of the Bulgarian Jews. When in 1954 Rabbi Samuel Toledano became the chief Rabbi of Israel, he invited Rabbi Daniel Zion to be a judge in the Rabbinical court of Jerusalem. When the rumors started to fly that Rabbi Daniel Zion believes in Yeshua, Rabbi Toledano invited Rabbi Zion to his office and asked him personally about these rumors. Rabbi Daniel explained to Toledano his position. He explained that he accepts Yeshua as the Messiah and he does not accept Christianity as the true expression of the teaching and person of Yeshua the Messiah. Rabbi Toledano said to him that he can live with this position as long as Rabbi Daniel will keep it to himself. When Rabbi Daniel said that he did not think that such a message can be kept a secret, Toledano was forced to take Rabbi Daniel to the Rabbinic court, and allow the other Rabbis to decide what should be done.

In the court after evidence of Rabbi Daniel's faith in Yeshua the Messiah was presented in the form of four books that Rabbi Daniel had written in Bulgarian about the Yeshua. The right to speak was given to Rabbi Daniel. Here are the words which Rabbi Daniel Zion spoke in his own defense:

I am poor and feeble, persecuted and vulnerable, Yeshua conquered me, and with the New Man he honored me, He delivered me from the poverty-stricken self with his great love, he cherish me.

Every day the canny devil aspires to grab my faith, I hold on to my encourager, and chase the devil away. I stand here alone in my faith, the whole world is against me. I give up all the earthly honor for the sake of the Messiah my mate.

The Rabbinical Court striped Rabbi Daniel from his Rabbinical Title, but the Bulgarian Jews continued to honor Rabbi Daniel as their Rabbi. A Russian Jew who was one of the early Zionist settlers in Rishon LeZion, and had become a "believer", had given Rabbi Daniel Zion a building on Yeffet St. in the heart of Jaffa for a Synagogue. In that Synagogue Rabbi Daniel officiated until the 6th of October 1973. In this Synagogue Rabbi Daniel Zion did not often speak of Yeshua openly, but many times he brought stories and parables from the New Testament. However, each Sabbath after the Synagogue Rabbi Daniel would bring home a group of his fellow worshipers from the Synagogue and they would study about Yeshua and from the New Testament all the Sabbath after-noon until they would go back to the Synagogue to say the evening prayers.

Many Missions, Missionaries, and Christian Societies, visited Rabbi Daniel Zion in his Jaffa home. They wrote many articles about him, and at rare occasions would even offer him large amounts of money for

the use of his name in their ministries. In every case Rabbi Daniel rejected their offers. He did not want to destroy his witness with the people of Israel for a handful of dollars. If any one would give him some free-will offering without any strings attached the Rabbi would accept it and pass it on to charitable organizations of the blind, or to orphans and widows. He himself lived in abject poverty. There was nothing in his own house that was of value and he would never lock his home.

Rabbi Daniel Zion wrote hundreds of songs about Yeshua the Messiah, Sabbath, and the good life. He also wrote books on the subject of vegetarianism, health food, and natural living.

Rabbi Daniel's major contribution to the Messianic Judaism is his personal example. He lived 100 % Jewish lifestyle, and was 100 % follower of the Messiah Yeshua. He did not compromise faith for neither money from the Christian missions, nor did he succumb to the pressures of the chief rabbinate. Yeshua was his savior and friend and until the last days of his life Rabbi Daniel Zion lived up to the poem that he wrote with the acrostic of his name, Daniel Zion the Servant of God.

The (Daver) Word of God is my path,
 The (Ner) Lamp of God is my guide,
 The (Iraat) Fear of God is the beginning of Wisdom,
 The (Ahavat) Love of God is my Life,
 The (Laasoth) Doing the will of God is my aspiration,
 (Zedek) Righteousness and Justice are my goals,
 His (Isurim) Suffering is my atonement,
 He will (OYagen) protect you in all your ways,
 The (Nezah) Eternal one of Israel is my comfort.

In 1979 Rabbi Daniel Zion departed to be with the Lord in a ripe old age of 96 years. The Bulgarian Jewish community of Israel gave him full military, and state honors. His bier stood in the center of Jaffa with a military guard and at noon was carried by men all the way to the Holon cemetery on foot. He was buried as the Chief Rabbi of Bulgarian Jews who saved them from the Nazi holocaust. He was 100 % Jewish 100 % follower and disciple of Yeshua the Messiah.