

# Waiting for Mashiach

Jewish Source materials on Messiah and Messianism

Prepared by Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

Broadly speaking, the Messiah will be a descendant of King David who, in the future, will reign over a peaceful and prosperous Israel.

According to some--most prominently, Maimonides--this is all he is. The Messiah is not a wonderworker, nor is the messianic era a miraculous age. In fact, according to Maimonides, the Messiah will die and be succeeded by his sons. This tradition of a political (and possibly military) redeemer dates to the age of the latter prophets, who living after the peak years of the Israelite monarchy, looked forward to a time when Jewish self-rule would be restored.

Other thinkers and texts stress the utopian--not the restorative--nature of the messianic era and suggest that the age of the Messiah will be a super-natural time. According to one Talmudic source, for example, humans will have only good inclinations in the messianic era (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 52a).

For many--but by no means all--contemporary Jews, the messianic idea is as important now as it has been in the past. However, some moderns have rejected the idea that the messianic age will be defined by the arrival of an individual Messiah, and instead look to the messianic dream as a source of hope for a perfected and peaceful world.



## From The Bible

*The Bible does not use the word Messiah to refer to an eschatological redeemer. The word Messiah is derived from the Hebrew mashah, to anoint, and in the Bible, refers to a king or priest with a special divine purpose. In fact, Isaiah 45:1 refers to the Persian King Cyrus as God's anointed, because God caused him to allow the Israelites to return from their exile in Babylonia.*

*Some of the latter prophets--Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Zechariah--do discuss a future age that will be marked by unprecedented peace and prosperity and will be ushered in by a descendant of King David. But they do not call this person "Messiah." Most of the scriptural requirements concerning the Messiah, what he will do, and what will be done during his reign are located in the Book of Isaiah, although requirements are mentioned by other prophets as well.*

- Isaiah 1:26: "And I will restore your judges as at first and your counsellors as in the beginning; afterwards you shall be called City of Righteousness, Faithful City." Some Jews interpret this to mean that the Sanhedrin will be re-established. (Isaiah 1:26)
- Once he is King, leaders of other nations will look to him for guidance. (Isaiah 2:4)
- The whole world will worship the One God of Israel (Isaiah 2:11-17)
- He will be descended from King David (Isaiah 11:1) via Solomon (1 Chronicles 22:8-10, 2 Chronicles 7:18)
- The "spirit of the Lord" will be upon him, and he will have a "fear of God" (Isaiah 11:2)
- Evil and tyranny will not be able to stand before his leadership (Isaiah 11:4)
- Knowledge of God will fill the world (Isaiah 11:9)
- He will include and attract people from all cultures and nations (Isaiah 11:10)
- All Israelites will be returned to their homeland (Isaiah 11:12)
- Death will be swallowed up forever (Isaiah 25:8)
- There will be no more hunger or illness, and death will cease (Isaiah 25:8)
- All of the dead will rise again (Isaiah 26:19)
- The Jewish people will experience eternal joy and gladness (Isaiah 51:11)
- He will be a messenger of peace (Isaiah 52:7)
- Nations will recognize the wrongs they did to Israel (Isaiah 52:13-53:5)
- The peoples of the world will turn to the Jews for spiritual guidance (Zechariah 8:23)
- The ruined cities of Israel will be restored (Ezekiel 16:55)
- Weapons of war will be destroyed (Ezekiel 39:9)
- The people of Israel will have direct access to the Torah through their minds. study will become the study the wisdom of the heart. (Jeremiah 31:33)<sup>[2]</sup>
- He will give you all the worthy desires of your heart (Psalms 37:4)
- He will take the barren land and make it abundant and fruitful (Isaiah 51:3, Amos 9:13-15, Ezekiel 36:29-30, Isaiah 11:6-9)

## Who is the Messiah?

[http://www.mvjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Afterlife and Messiah/Messianism/Who is the Messiah Prn.shtml](http://www.mvjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Afterlife%20and%20Messiah/Messianism/Who%20is%20the%20Messiah%20Prn.shtml)

By Jeffrey Spitzer

*The idea that a human being--the Messiah--will help usher in the redemption of the Jewish people has roots in the Bible. However, Jewish sources have not, as a general rule, focused attention on the specific personal qualities of*

*the Messiah. Images of the Messiah as humble or as a child are juxtaposed with images of a victorious and wise ruler--perhaps contrasting Israel's current, unredeemed state and the prophetic vision of the future. In recent times, some Jews have "democratized" the concept of the Messiah, seeing the process of, or the preparation for, redemption in the actions of regular people.*

### **A Child Who Grows Up to Rule in Peace**

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government is upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called "wonderful counselor of the mighty God, of the everlasting Father, of the Prince of peace."

*--Isaiah 9:5*

### **Judge and Descendant of King David**

And there shall come forth a rod from the stock of Jesse [King David's father], and a branch shall grow from his roots; and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord; and he shall not judge by what his eyes see, nor decide by what his ears hear. But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the humble of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.

*--Isaiah 11:1-4*

### **Great Warrior**

How great was the strength of Ben Koziva [a.k.a. Bar Kokhba--the leader of the 132-135 CE Judean revolt against Rome]? He would intercept the stones shot by Roman catapults with one of his knees, heave them back, and thus slay ever so many Roman soldiers. When R. Akiba beheld Ben Koziva, he exclaimed, " 'A star (*kokhav*) has risen out of Jacob [Numbers 24:17]'--Koziva has risen out of Jacob! He is the king Messiah."

*--Lamentations Rabbah 2:2 §4*

### **Skilled Judge**

Bar Koziva ruled for two and a half years, and then said to the rabbis, "I am the Messiah." They answered, "It is written that the Messiah can judge by smell (based on Isaiah 11:3); let us see whether he [Bar Koziva] can do so." When they saw that he could not judge by smell, they killed him.

*--Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 93b*

### **The Messiah's Arrival Depends Upon the People Israel**

R. Alexandri said, R. Joshua contrasted two verses: It is written, "And behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13), and another verse says, "[behold, your king comes to you...] humble and riding on an ass" (Zechariah 9:7). If Israel merits it, [he will come] "with the clouds of heaven"; if not, [he will be] "humble and riding on an ass."

*--Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a*

## **The Messiah as a Blighted Beggar**

R. Joshua ben Levi [asked Elijah, the prophet who it is said will be the harbinger of the messianic age] "When will the Messiah come?" "Go and ask him himself." "Where is he sitting?" "At the gates of Rome." "What will identify him?" "He is sitting among the poor lepers; while all of them untie all [their bandages] at once, and rebandage them together, he unties and rebandages each separately, [before treating the next], saying 'I might be needed, so I must not be delayed.' "

*—Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a*

## **The Despised but Beautiful Messiah**

I turned and someone touched me. I saw a man, despicable and crippled...and he said to me, "Do not fear, you were brought here so I could see you...This is Rome, where I am bound in prison until my end comes."

When I heard this, I hid my face; then I turned back to peek, and hid my face yet again from fear. "Why are you afraid?" "I have heard rumors. You are the Messiah." He then appeared to me as an incomparably beautiful youth.

[An angel explained to me,] "Menachem the son of Amiel will come suddenly in the month of Nisan and stand at the Arbel valley. All of the sages of Israel will come out to him, and the son of Amiel will say to them, 'I am the Messiah whom God has sent as good tidings to save you from your enemies.' And the sages will despise him, just as you [initially] despised him and did not believe him. His fury will burn, and he will dress himself in vengeance and come to the gates of Jerusalem with Elijah the prophet and resurrect Nehemiah ben Hushiel who was killed, and then they will believe in Menachem ben Amiel."

*—The pseudonymous Sefer Zerubavel, c. 7th century, published in Jellinek, Bet haMidrash.*

## **Academic Head**

All the righteous have been heads of academies on earth, and have become disciples of the heavenly academy, and the Messiah visits all these academies and puts his seal on the Torah that comes from the mouths of the teachers.

*—Zohar Bereishit 1, 4b*

## **A Successful Philosopher/King/General**

If a king from the House of David studies Torah, busies himself with the commandments like David did, observes the laws of the written and the oral law, convinces Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and to repair its breaches, and fights the battles of the Lord, it may be assumed that he is the Messiah. If he succeeds at these things, rebuilds the Temple on its site, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is beyond all doubt the Messiah...But if he does not succeed fully, or is slain, it is obvious that he is not the Messiah promised in the Torah.

*—Maimonides, Laws of Kings 11:3-4 (uncensored version)*

## **There is No Messiah, Just a Messianic Age**

The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform [stating the principles of Reform Judaism] rejected the traditional Jewish hope for an heir of King David to arise when the world was ready to acknowledge that heir as the one anointed (the original

meaning of *mashiach*, anglicized into "Messiah"). In the *Avot*, the first [blessing] of the Amidah [a central prayer in Jewish liturgy], Reformers changed the prayerbook's hope for a *go-el*, a redeemer, to *geulah*, redemption...

—Commentary on the Pittsburgh Platform, [www.ccarnet.org](http://www.ccarnet.org)

### The Messiah Could Be Anyone

The thing I love most about being Jewish is waiting for the Messiah! That is what I love the most...waiting, waiting, like so much of life...we Jews are waiting for the Messiah...I love that the book is still open on the question of the identity of Moshiach [messiah]...Eleanor Roosevelt, George Balanchine, Martin Luther King, Nadine Gordimer, Fred Rogers, Richard Pryor, Cruz Irizarry, the woman who takes care of my kids when I'm working, the UPS man who's so nice about carrying in the boxes and setting them down wherever you need, the sexy guys from the cable company...it's like a big Halloween party, life is a costume party in which anyone may come forward from behind the masks and reveal themselves as Moshiach.

-- Deb Margolin, performance artist, *"Oh Wholly Night" and Other Jewish Solecisms*, 1996

### Waiting for Us, Among Those Who Need Healing

Instead of bringing about the onset of redemption, messiah will herald its completion. The actual work of redeeming the world is turned to us in history, and is done by all of us, day by day. Messiah has been waiting in the wings, as it were, since the very beginning of history, ready to come forth when the time is right. According to one legend, he sits among the lepers at the gates of Rome—today we would be likely to find him in an AIDS hospice—tending to their wounds. Only when redemption is about to be completed will messiah be allowed to arrive. Rather than messiah redeeming us, we redeem messiah.

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Jeffrey Spitzer is Chair of the Department of Talmud and Rabbinics at Gann Academy, The New Jewish High School, Waltham, Mass., and a member of the Institute's Tichon Fellows Program.

## Rabbinic and Later Periods

**Though messianism is rarely discussed in the Mishnah, it is very much present in the Gemara and Midrash.** Here, the redeemer is called "Messiah," and he is described in a multitude of ways. He is sometimes a military, political figure and other times a being with supernatural abilities. In another fascinating characterization, the Messiah is said to be on earth already, dressed like a blighted beggar, sitting at the gates of Rome, awaiting Jewish repentance.

No discussion of the rabbinic Messiah can ignore the figure of Shimon Bar Kokhba, the leader of the Judean revolt against Rome from the 132-135 CE. According to several rabbinic sources, Rabbi Akiba, the greatest sage of the time, proclaimed that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah.

A second Messiah figure, Messiah ben Joseph, also emerged in rabbinic literature. With the introduction of Messiah ben Joseph, the messianic task was split in two. Messiah ben Joseph will be a military figure who will lead the Jewish people in an apocalyptic battle against Gog and Magog. He will die in this battle, but soon after, true redemption will be ushered in by Messiah ben David.

As for the specifics of the messianic age, as with most theological issues, rabbinic literature has no uniform theory or theology. Generally speaking, the messianic era will be preceded by Jewish suffering, the "birth pangs" of the Messiah. Afterwards, the exiled Jewish community will return to Israel, the Davidic monarchy will be restored, and all of humanity will recognize the true God. Whether there will be supernatural occurrences is a matter of debate.

For the most part, it was believed that the coming of the Messiah depended on the meritorious activity of the Jews, though according to one rabbinic source, if God felt the time had come for redemption, then God would impose a ruler so wicked that Israel would repent, thus becoming righteous enough to merit salvation.

In medieval times, Maimonides canonized belief in the Messiah as one of his Thirteen Principles of Faith. He was vigorous in his assertion that the messianic age would not be a miraculous time; the Messiah would be a political ruler who would die and be succeeded by his sons.

Messianism was intricately linked with medieval mysticism as well. Isaac Luria's theology focused on *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world, which, when completed, would bring the Messiah. According to Gershom Scholem, the spread of Lurianic kabbalah paved the way for the most tragic messianic movement in Jewish history: the 17th-century movement of Shabbatai Zvi.

In addition, Moshe Idel has recently highlighted the attempt by individual mystics to achieve messianic consciousness. Mystics, like Abraham Abulafia, didn't just try to bring the Messiah, they tried to *become* the Messiah.

Messianism is still a prominent theme in modern Judaism, though many contemporary Jews have rejected belief in an individual Messiah. Zionism has many messianic undertones in its focus on national redemption, and in the last decade, messianic fervor has fermented amongst the Habad Lubavitch Hasidim, some of whom claim that their late leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is in fact the Messiah. These Hasidim believe that the "Rebbe," as Schneerson is known, will be resurrected (or that he isn't truly "dead") and will return to fulfill the messianic work he began during his lifetime. Many people, both outside and within the Habad movement, have repudiated this notion of a resurrected Jewish Messiah.

## From The Talmud

R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of R. Simeon b. Yohai's tomb. He asked him: 'Have I a portion in the world to come?' He replied, 'if this Master desires it.' R. Joshua b. Levi said, 'I saw two, but heard the voice of a third.' He then asked him, 'When will the Messiah come?' — 'Go and ask him himself,' was his reply. 'Where is he sitting?' — 'At the entrance.' And by what sign may I recognize him?' — 'He is sitting among the poor lepers: all of them untie [them] all at once, and rebandage them together, whereas he unties and rebandages each separately, [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted, [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of sores].' So he went to him and greeted him, saying, 'peace upon thee, Master and Teacher.' 'peace upon thee, O son of Levi,' he replied. 'When wilt thou come Master?' asked he, 'Today', was his answer. On his returning to Elijah, the latter enquired, 'What did he say to thee?' — 'peace Upon thee, O son of Levi,' he answered. Thereupon he [Elijah] observed, 'He thereby assured thee and thy father of [a portion in] the world to come.' 'He spoke falsely to me,' he rejoined, 'stating that he would come to-day, but has not.' He [Elijah] answered him, 'This is what he said to thee, To-day, if ye will listen to his voice.'

## **MAIMONIDES 13 PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

In his commentary on the Mishneh (tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10), Maimonides formulates his **13 principles of faith**. They summarized what he viewed as the required beliefs of Judaism with regards to:

*The existence of God*  
*God's unity*  
*God's spirituality and incorporeality*  
*God's eternity*  
*God alone should be the object of worship*  
*Revelation through God's prophets*  
*The preeminence of Moses among the prophets*  
*God's law given on Mount Sinai*  
*The immutability of the Torah as God's Law*  
*God's foreknowledge of human actions*  
*Reward of good and retribution of evil*  
*The coming of the Jewish Messiah*  
*The resurrection of the dead*

### **According to Maimonides “Laws of Kings” (Mishna Torah) chaps 11,12**

"Do not imagine that the anointed king must perform miracles and signs and create new things in the world or resurrect the dead and so on. The matter is not so: For Rabbi Akiva was a great scholar of the sages of the Mishnah, and he was the assistant-warrior of the king Bar Kokhba, and claimed that he was the anointed king. He and all the Sages of his generation deemed him the anointed king, until he was killed by sins; only since he was killed, they knew that he was not. The Sages asked him neither a miracle nor a sign..."

"And if a king shall arise from among the House of David, studying Torah and indulging in commandments like his father David, according to the written and oral Torah, and he will impel all of Israel to follow it and to strengthen breaches in its observance, and will fight Hashem's [God's] wars, this one is to be treated as if he were the anointed one. If he succeeded and built a Holy Temple in its proper place and gathered the dispersed ones of Israel together, this is indeed the anointed one for certain, and he will mend the entire world to worship the Lord together, as it is stated: "For then I shall turn for the nations a clear tongue, to call all in the Name of the Lord and to worship Him with one shoulder (Zephaniah 3:9)."

"But if he did not succeed to this degree, or if he was killed, it becomes known that he is not this one of whom the Torah had promised us, and he is indeed like all proper and wholesome kings of the House of David who died. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, only set him up to try the public by him, thus: "Some of the wise men will stumble in clarifying these words, and in elucidating and interpreting when the time of the end will be, for it is not yet the designated time." (Daniel 11:35)."



..."As for Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed to be the anointed one and was condemned by the Sanhedrin. Daniel had already prophesied about him, thus: 'And the children of your people's rebels shall raise themselves to set up prophecy and will stumble.' (Ibid. 14) Can there be a bigger stumbling block than this? All the Prophets said that the anointed one saves Israel and rescues them, gathers their strayed ones and strengthens their *mitzvot* whereas this one caused the loss of Israel by sword, and to scatter their remnant and humiliate them, and to change the Torah and to cause most of the world to erroneously worship a god besides the Lord. But the human mind has no power to reach the thoughts of the Creator, for his thoughts and ways are unlike ours. All these matters of Yeshu of Nazareth and of Muhammad who stood up after him are only intended to pave the way for the anointed king, and to mend the entire world to worship God together, thus: 'For then I shall turn a clear tongue to the nations to call all in the Name of the Lord and to worship him with one shoulder.'"

"How is this? The entire world had become filled with the issues of the anointed one and of the Torah and the Laws, and these issues had spread out unto faraway islands and among many nations uncircumcised in the heart, and they discuss these issues and the Torah's laws. These say: These Laws were true but are already defunct in these days, and do not rule for the following generations; whereas the other ones say: There are secret layers in them and they are not to be treated literally, and the Messiah had come and revealed their secret meanings. But when the anointed king will truly rise and succeed and will be raised and uplifted, they all immediately turn about and know that their fathers inherited falsehood, and their prophets and ancestors led them astray."

## Compassion That Can Bring Messiah - It all begins with how we treat animals.



**By Rabbi Dovid Sears**

*Provided by [Canfei Nesharim](#), providing Torah wisdom about the importance of protecting our environment.*

"If you chance upon a bird's nest along the way in any tree or on the ground, whether it contains young birds or eggs, and the mother is sitting upon the young birds or upon the eggs--you shall not take the mother bird together with her children. You shall surely send away (*shalei'ach tishalach*) the mother, and only then may you take the young for yourself; that it may go well for you, and you may prolong your days (Deut. 22:6-7)."

Our Sages discern within this Torah law several surprising and far-reaching implications. Concerning the phrase *shalei'ach tishalach* ("you shall surely send away"), the Midrash states:

"Why does the verse use a double expression? Because one who fulfills the 'sending forth' of this precept will be granted the privilege of 'sending forth' a slave to freedom. As it is written (Deut. 15:12), 'And when you send him forth free...' Fulfilling the precept of sending forth the mother bird also hastens the advent of the Messiah...

"Rabbi Tanchuma said: Fulfilling this precept hastens the arrival of Elijah the Prophet, whose coming is associated with the expression 'to send forth.' As it states (Malakhi 3:23), 'Behold, I shall send forth to you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of God...' and he shall console you as it says (ibid.), 'He will return the hearts of parents towards children.'"

At first glance, these connections may seem arbitrary. What does the act of sending away a mother bird before taking the nestlings have to do with freeing slaves, or the coming of Elijah the Prophet and the Messiah? The Midrash uses the verb *tishalach* (to send away) as the element that connects the issues it mentions. But this semantic link between the three verses only begs the question: What do these issues actually have in common?

### **Judaism & Animals**

A possible answer may be found by considering Jewish teachings on compassion to animals. While the Torah clearly places humanity above the animal kingdom, it mandates respect for all creatures, forbids causing animals unnecessary suffering, and idealizes the state of peace and harmony among all living things that will prevail during the Messianic era. The term *nefesh chayah* (living soul) is applied to animals as well as humans (Genesis 1:21, 1:24).

The Kabbalists, too, stress the importance of compassion and respect for animals, since all things emanate from the Divine Wisdom and serve God's Will. Perhaps the cornerstone of the Jewish attitude toward animals is the Psalmist's declaration (145:9): "His compassion is upon all of His works." The Talmud (Sota 14a) teaches: Because the Creator shows compassion to all creatures, so should we.

### **The Torah Ideal**

The Jewish paradigm of a perfect world is the Garden of Eden, in which harmony and peace existed between all creatures. The curse of death had not been visited upon the world, and both humans and animals were vegetarian, both by instinct and Divine mandate. (In fact, even after the banishment from Eden humans were not permitted to eat meat until after the great flood during the generation of Noah.) This Eden-like state of harmony and peace will be restored in the Messianic era. As the prophet Isaiah states (11:6-7), "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb...the lion shall eat straw like the ox..."

According to Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, first Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, all creatures will then return to their original vegetarian diet, for the *tikkun* (spiritual rectification) accomplished by meat-eating will have been fully accomplished.

Of course, the central feature of the Messianic era is freedom from political subjugation. The entire Jewish people will return to the land of Israel, where at last they will dwell in peace. All conflict between nations will cease.

Beyond this, human nature itself will be transformed, as it is written, "A new heart I shall give you, and a new spirit I shall put within you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I shall give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26)." The prophets envisioned a future world in which compassion, not selfishness and strife, will proliferate. "They shall neither hurt nor destroy upon all My holy mountain, for the knowledge of God shall fill the earth as the water covers the seas (Isaiah 11:9)."

### From Study to Deeds

Given this, we can see a profound connection between the mitzvah of sending forth the mother bird, the freeing of a slave, and the advent of the Messiah. According to another Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 6:1), this precept is an act of compassion:

"Rabbi Yudan ben Pazi stated: Why is an infant circumcised after eight days? The Holy One, blessed be He, extended mercy to him by waiting until he became strong enough. And just as the Holy One, blessed be He, has mercy on human beings, so does He have mercy on animals; as it is written, 'A bullock, a lamb, or a kid goat, when it is born, it shall be seven days under its mother, but from the eighth day and thenceforth it may be accepted as an offering to God (Leviticus 22:27).' Not only this, but the Holy One, blessed be He, declared, '(A mother cow) and her young you shall not slaughter on the same day (Leviticus 22:28).' And just as the Holy One, blessed be He, has mercy upon beasts, so does He have mercy upon birds, as it is written (Deut. 22:6), 'When you encounter a bird's nest...'"

Certainly the Torah wishes to ennoble us through its teachings (Avot 1:17): "The study (*midrash*) is not the main thing, but the deed (*ma'aseh*)."

The practical implication of the precept of sending away the mother bird is clear: acts of compassion for other human beings (such as freeing a slave) and ultimately world peace and enlightenment are brought about by an act of compassion for animals.

Why should this be so? Perhaps because acts that bespeak an enlightened spirit are inherently Messianic. The example here is of sending away the mother bird; but this is implicitly true of all acts of compassion. A person can be compassionate only by putting aside self-concern and considering the total situation of which he or she is a part. This holistic awareness will be fully attained during the Messianic era.

The spirit that moves us to behave in a sensitive and caring manner is an extension of that revolution in human consciousness. Thus, the Midrash enjoins us to bring the Messiah by becoming attuned to this spirit and allowing it to inspire our actions. Then, to paraphrase the words of our Sages (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat, 151b), the Merciful One will surely have mercy on those who are merciful.



Rabbi Dovid Sears is the author of *The Vision of Eden: Animal Welfare and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism* (Orot 2003) among other Judaica works.

## Optimism Now, Apocalypse Later

Tuesday, November 30, 2010 - Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

I was scheduling a lifecycle event with a congregant the other day and we ran into a snag having to do with his 27-year-old daughter's vacation schedule. "Oh, sorry rabbi," he said, "that weekend will be impossible. Amy will be trekking in Vietnam."

Come again?

It turns out that she'll be there with a friend, another young congregant who, as I recall, became bat mitzvah the day before yesterday. It also turns out that 'Nam has become an increasingly popular place to visit, to the tune of five million tourists this year, according to the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, the highest number in two decades.

It used to be that most Americans 20-somethings who went over to Vietnam did so rather more reluctantly, many returning in body bags. But those who were once terrified of sending their sons are now freely sending their single young granddaughters.

If Americans can be welcomed as tourists in My Lai, it seems logical that Palestinians and Israelis might be able to sip tea together in Ramallah. Why not? As the world continues shrinking, the inconceivable is becoming routine overnight. Thirty-five years ago, when the last Americans helicoptered out of Saigon, who could have imagined a world where one could freely crisscross Berlin or buy matzah in Moscow. If the Pope can endorse condoms, then pigs truly can fly - or at least they can practice safe sex.

A new kind of domino theory is taking hold, replacing the antiquated ethos of the Cold War era. Everywhere we look, walls of separation are crumbling. France and Germany share the same currency, Turkey and Greece share tourists by the boatload and South Africans all share the same multicolored flag. Wherever you look, ancient feuds are melting away. Shimon Peres' vision of a New Middle East seems to actually be happening, at least everywhere but in the Middle East.

Israel long ago got aboard the global gravy train and the dissolution of international enmities has fueled its economic rise. Jews have always flourished in a world without walls. Now we hear that Israel's high-tech prowess might have yielded an enormous security dividend - the Stuxnet computer worm, rumored to have caused extensive damage to the Iranian nuclear program. Add to that the recent discovery of massive natural gas and oil reserves, along with the improved security and economic situation for West Bank Palestinians, and this year's Chanukah lights might just be signaling us to abandon cynicism and believe in miracles again. This time, the peace process could actually work.

After the collapse of Oslo, it's not easy to be an optimist. But guarded hopefulness should not be confused with messianic fervor. Messianism is in fact our greatest danger, for it leads to xenophobia and

military adventurism. The rabbis understood that, which is why the name Maccabee, which they came to associate with such adventurism, was virtually expunged from the Talmud.

It's the messianic yearnings of those who detect darker trends in history that threaten to hijack the peace train. Fundamentalism in all its guises is the enemy right now. The Iranian mullahs and their Gazan and Lebanese proxies rank highest on that list - by far. Jewish fundamentalists, while far less destructive, also possess a dark vision of the world, one fueled by visions of apocalyptic devastation, conspiracy theories and a stark delineation of Us from Them, with the definition of "Us" growing narrower by the minute.

And because the haredim and nationalist extremists hold disproportionate sway in the Israeli government, they are especially dangerous. Each outrageous act only serves to isolate Israel more and more in the eyes of the world and American Jewry. If the greatest danger to Israel now is delegitimization, their provocations are only adding fuel to the Goldstone-stoked fire.

The squabble with the Obama administration over the settlement freeze would hardly have caused a ripple if it had not occurred immediately following last summer's Rotem Bill fiasco and the plethora of annulled conversions, the arrest of Anat Hoffman for carrying a Torah, the creeping haredi annexation of the Western Wall, the Jim Crow-like treatment of women on busses and public streets, and talk of loyalty oaths and the transfer of Israeli Arabs. Throw in the repeated insults to Joe Biden over Jerusalem construction and excuse us for wondering if Glenn Beck is running the show over there.

There's been much consternation lately over J Street. A synagogue near Boston even disinvited their president Jeremy Ben-Ami recently, sending a horrible message to turned-off Jews everywhere. But with all the questions raised about J Street, some quite justified, no one has asked how such a "radical, fringe group fronting for Israel's enemies" now counts over 500 in its rabbinic cabinet. I would venture to say that not every one of them is an unwitting lackey for the so-called "Puppet Master," George Soros. Some rabbis are actually fairly bright people.

I know why I was one of the signers, and why I did not disinvite Ben-Ami when he appeared at my synagogue just a week after the J Street-Soros connection was revealed.

I signed because my fear of an Israel driven by dark apocalyptic visions trumps my more limited fear that American Jews are speaking with multiple, conflicting voices.

Israel can survive vigorous diaspora dialogue - it has for decades. But it cannot survive with people at the wheel who think God loves land more than peace, who deny the humane values that Jews have held for millennia.

My concern for Israel is so deep that I am willing to proclaim publicly that the messianists could be messing up the last good chance for peace. I love Israel too much to stay silent.

Miracles happen, and all conflicts end, eventually. Even the Hatfields and McCoys signed a truce not long ago. Our girls are trekking in the very homeland of "Apocalypse Now." There's no reason this pig can't fly.

## Modern Jewish Messianism

**Jewish messianism has been repeatedly reinterpreted in the modern era.**

**By Rabbi David S. Ariel**

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In the decades before the Holocaust, the belief in the Messiah was the subject of considerable debate within the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

Many young Jews rejected the Orthodoxy of their parents and turned to the great Jewish secular movements of Zionism, socialism, and Bundism [a Jewish labor movement founded in Eastern Europe in the 19th century]. They viewed their parents' faith in the eventual coming of the Messiah as a dangerous passivity in the face of imminent danger to the Jewish people. They took their fate into their own hands and created new forms of secular Jewish messianic activity. Their concern for changing the world by rejecting their religious background shows how deeply they were immersed in the Jewish search for redemption.

Hasidism, the 18th-century spiritual movement, also concerned itself with new approaches to redemption. After the [false messianic] Sabbatean debacle of the previous century, Hasidism abandoned active forms of messianism for a system of redemption within the individual. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, taught that one need not look outside one's own soul for redemption: "All our prayers for redemption are essentially bound to be prayers for the redemption of the individual.

He urged that we turn inward and seek redemption through seeking transcendence in all our actions and transactions. As Martin Buber, a leading interpreter of Hasidism said, "There is no definite magic action that is effective for redemption; only the hallowing of all actions without distinction possesses redemptive power. Only out of the redemption of the everyday does the Day of Redemption grow."

### Chabad Messianism

Even though it appeared that the idea of a Messiah had run its course, traditional Jewish messianism endures. The Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim, one of the largest of the remaining hasidic sects, believes that the messianic age is imminent.

They point to the events of the last several decades--the recapture of Jerusalem in 1967; the

ingathering of the immigrants from the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Syria, and Yemen, the Gulf War; and the collapse of Communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe--as signs. They believe that if the great majority of Jews repent and return to observance, the Messiah will arrive immediately. Their task, as they see it, is to stand ready for the arrival of the Messiah.

The late Lubavitcher rebbe, Menahem Mendel Schneerson, said that this "generation is the last generation of Exile and the first generation of Redemption (Me-Golah le-Geulah, p.101)." Many of his followers believed that he was the Messiah. They point out that he fit the description of the human redeemer whose good works have brought many Jews back to Judaism. If it turns out that the messianic age is not upon us, they will [likely] attribute that not to him but to the lack of readiness of this generation.

The Lubavitchers seized on his hints and innuendoes about their rabbi's role as the Messiah, but in the meantime they poured their energy into the observance of the mitzvot.

## **Zionist Messianism**

They have a very different outlook from the extreme religious messianists in Israel, who are preparing to establish the Third Temple on the Temple Mount in anticipation of the Messiah's imminent arrival. Among the latter are weavers, smiths, and other artisans who have even crafted the vestments, utensils, and paraphernalia necessary to conduct the priestly sacrifices in the rebuilt Temple.

The messianic idea, as opposed to a literal belief in the Messiah, fueled many of the modern Jewish political movements. Zionism, which gained force among the unemancipated Jews of Eastern Europe after 1881, was based on several powerful forces--some modern, some traditional.

Zionism sprouted from the modern political judgment that anti-Semitism was endemic to European regimes and could not be solved through attempts at societal reform. It also drew upon the romantic nationalistic idea that every people is a nation and every nation should have a state as a national home. Despite the opposition of traditionalists, the modern political aspirations of Jewish nationalists found their deepest psychological support in the Jewish tradition of the messianic return to Zion.

Religious Zionists saw their efforts to rebuild Zion as a partnership with the Messiah. Paradoxically, the popular support for the secular Zionists' return to Zion came from the centuries-old tradition of restorationist Jewish messianism, despite the fact that this "return to Zion" would result in a secular parliamentary democracy, not a theocracy.

## **Secular Messianism**

Jewish radicalism can also be seen as a form of modern Jewish messianism. Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and other Bolsheviks, and the New Left of the 1960s are often described as secular Jewish messianists in a "search for redemption that is so strong in Jewish history (Nora Levin, *While the Messiah Tarried*, foreword)."

According to this theory, you can take a Jew out of the tradition, but you cannot take messianism out

of a Jew. [Literary critic] Irving Howe saw messianism as “the most urgent force in Jewish tradition, the force that could send a quiescent people into moments of transport and even collective frenzy (World of Our Fathers, p.223).” He saw socialism and Zionism as secular expressions of this force. The essence of Judaism, in his view, is the hope for a Messiah, which these movements have transformed into a commitment to radical political change.

## **Liberal Religious Messianism**

Modern religious denominations have also had to come to terms with the messianic belief.

Reform Judaism rejected traditional Jewish messianism. Its liturgical changes included the removal from the prayer book of all references to the Messiah and to an eventual return to the Land of Israel. The idea of the personal Messiah was reinterpreted as the longing for universal brotherhood within the context of ethical monotheism. More recently, the Reform concept of messianism has come to mean the result of human effort on behalf of creating the perfect world.

Despite the extremely positive references to the State of Israel in the modern prayer books, there is no preaching of a personal return. This is a messianic age without a Messiah--the fulfillment of the particular destiny of the Jewish people in a modern, universalistic mode.

Conservative Judaism understands the body of rabbinic ideas on messianism as “elaborate metaphors generated by deep-seated human and communal needs (Emet ve-Emunah, p.29).” The various images of the messianic age express the longing for a time of universal peace and social justice and for the ingathering of all Jews to Israel.

The Conservative movement, however, has replaced the idea of the messianic rebuilding of the Temple by anticipating an age in which the religious and ethical teachings of the Torah will become universal. The Final Judgment is not meant to be taken literally; it is understood as the idea of God’s justice. The Conservative credo is agnostic on the question of the Messiah:

“We do not know when the Messiah will come, nor whether he will be a charismatic human figure or is a symbol of the redemption of humankind from the evils of the world. Through the doctrine of a messianic figure, Judaism teaches us that every individual human being must live as if he or she, individually, has the responsibility to bring about the messianic age (Emet ve-Emunah, p.31).”



Dr. David S. Ariel is head of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. He was previously president of Baltimore Hebrew University and president of Siegal College of Judaic Studies (formerly the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies). He is author of *Spiritual Judaism: Restoring Heart and Soul to Jewish Life* and *The Mystic Quest: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism*.



# YOURSELF

# משיח

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**T**he Messiah will only come, goes one legend, when things get so bad we cannot live without him or so good we don't need her. Indeed, we often say that at that time all the contradictions, paradoxes, and antinomies will be resolved.

Love and hate, male and female, even good and evil at last will be in perfect balance. "When the Messiah

*See, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise that I made concerning the House of Israel and the House of Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a true branch of David's line, and he shall do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure. (Jeremiah 33:14-16)*

comes," we will understand how they all fit together and even why it seemed so important that they were once in conflict. But

(mo•shee'•ähkh) Messiah

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LAWRENCE KUSHNER  
"BOOK OF WORDS"

MISHNA

*In the footsteps of the Messiah presumption will increase and respect disappear. The empire will turn to heresy and there will be no moral reproof. The house of assembly will become a brothel, Galilee will be laid waste, and the people of the frontiers will wander from city to city and none will pity them. The wisdom of the scribes will become odious and those who shun sin will be despised; truth will nowhere be found. Boys will shame old men and old men will show deference to boys.*

will the Messiah come?" Elijah says, "Go and ask him yourself." Ben Levi finds the "son of David" at the gates of Rome and tells Ben Levi that he will "come today." Ben Levi goes back to Elijah and complains that he has been tricked, for surely the Messiah is not coming today. But Elijah only explains that "Today" refers to Psalm 95:7, which reads, "Today, if you will listen to My voice." In other words, the Messiah will come only when we listen to the voice of God.

"Listening to the voice of God" means attaining a rung of awareness on which hearing God's voice is

until that time, the syntax written in our brains cannot simultaneously comprehend a thing and its opposite. Because we cannot comprehend everything on one contradictory linear plane, we imagine a time when we won't need to. In this way, the notion of a Messiah is a metaphor for the resolution of all contradiction, when paradox will replace linear logic, right brain supersede the left.

According to Talmud, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asks Elijah, "When

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## ספר של דברים

routine. And once that happens all contradictions are dissolved and you yourself are the Messiah. You already have everything you need and you are where you need to be. Lions will lie down with lambs and then they will eat them because that's what lions and lambs do to and for one another. The way things are just now is messianic. The end of days is now and the Messiah is already here.

### ZOHAR

*The Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau will be exhausted.*

### Living Spiritual Talk K A V A N A H

Tradition wisely warns against "forcing the hand of the Messiah." On the other hand, imagining how much better things could be than they are now only guarantees despair.

Sometimes "the best" is the enemy of "the good." If you allow yourself to measure existence against a perfect standard, life will certainly be miserable. Things, by definition, could always be better than they are now. On the other hand, succumbing to the way things are now is to cease dreaming. The balance, perhaps, is to accept the way things are because, like it or not, for better or for worse, that is literally the only way things are. They, of course, can be different, but only later. To worry about "later" is to miss "now." Remember, one of us may be the Messiah. That possibility shouldn't, but nevertheless does, affect how we treat one another.

~~13~~

... a serious conversation with me. The least expect it. I've had some of my rabbis. . . . But from liberals, I get

aeli consul general in New York, interview  
oment, October 1996

n which I live today, men and women  
' do not allow themselves to be alone  
or related by blood. In so doing, they  
t. And for this they are to be envied.

, Beis Chanah Institute, St. Paul, Minn.,  
e? (1990)

en men and women] in the synagogue  
from misbehaving. The purpose is to  
y, which we can squander if we're not

it *Anyone Blush Anymore?* (1990)

Frank or Eva Braun as a date, it was  
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essayist, "Dreaming of Hitler," *Esquire*, Au-

vn to be different, it is usually women  
happen in response to my own work.

linguistics and author, *You Just Don't Un-  
Conversation* (1990)

menace or fidelity, or take responsibility  
urgeois, but to expect the same woman  
and fuck on command was only natural.

## ❖ MESSIAH ❖

We want Moshiach [Messiah] now!

—Lubavitch slogan, 1980s

While the idea of the rebbe as the Messiah has enormous significance for the Lubavitcher community, it hasn't changed anyone's plans for the summer.

—Rabbi David Hartman, founder and director of the Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, commenting on the belief within the Lubavitcher Hasidic community that the ninety-year-old rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, might be the Messiah, quoted in *Newsweek*, April 27, 1992

The idea of Elijah is a good thing for us in the 1990s. How often do we just open the door, dream a little, and surreptitiously check to see if a magical cup needs replenishing or not? How often do we just wonder if there's something out there that is more than what we can plainly see?

—Rabbi Ben Kamin, senior rabbi at the Temple-Tifereth Israel in Cleveland, *Thinking Passover* (1997)

The thing I love most about being Jewish is waiting for the Messiah! That is what I love the most . . . waiting, waiting, like so much of life . . . we Jews are waiting for the Messiah. Now many people believe the Messiah has already come, but we Jews are waiting . . . I love that the book is still open on the question of the identity of Moshiach [Messiah] . . . we Jews are sitting on the fire escape, having a smoke, noticing who goes by. I've noticed lots of people: Eleanor Roosevelt, George Balanchine, Martin Luther King, Nadine Gordimer, Fred Rogers, Richard Pryor, Cruz Irizarry, the woman who takes care of my kids when I'm working, the UPS man who's so nice about carrying in the boxes and setting them down wherever you need, the sexy guys from the cable company . . . it's like a big Halloween party, life is a costume party in which anyone may come forward from behind the masks and reveal themselves as Moshiach.

—Deb Margolin, performance artist, "*Oh Wholly Night*" and *Other Jewish Solecisms*, 1996

The avoiding of the twin pitfalls of despair and utopianism gives Jewish messianism its power. It is certainly the single most valuable concept which the Hebraic religion had bequeathed the world. Of course, the price we pay for this extraordinary idea is the possibility of its distortion.

—Rabbi Seymour Siegel, professor of theology, "Theology for Today," *Conservative Judaism*, Summer 1974

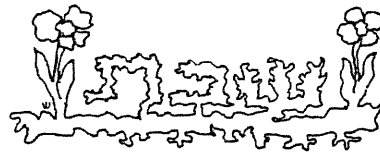
Ich leb far Moschiach tzu kumen. [Now I believe the Messiah is coming.]

—Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nobel-prize winning Yiddish writer, beginning his talk at the University of Texas-Austin, after being introduced—in Yiddish—by a gentile professor of Jewish studies, Robert King, 1979

With a broad hint that the "Era of Moshiach" is upon us, the Lubavitch advertisers invite us to jump on the bandwagon, and "Be part of it!" Both religion and politics are trivialized by this manipulation of hope. The advertisement promises Jews Redemption like a giveaway benefit of a Thanksgiving Day sale. Jews have maintained their disciplined religious civilization too long through too much painful history for it to be degraded by such cheapened rhetoric.

—Ruth R. Wisse, professor of Yiddish and comparative literature, *Forward*, November 1, 1991

FROM  
"THE JEWISH CATALOG"  
RABBI ART WASKOW



# How to bring Mashiah

1. "If you're planting a tree and you hear Mashiah has come, first finish planting and then run to the city gates to tell him Shalom" (Yochanan Ben Zakkai).

THEREFORE: Plant a tree somewhere as a small tikkun olam—fixing up the world—wherever the olam most needs it. Plant a tree in Vietnam in a defoliated former forest. *Go there to plant it* if possible (even if difficult); if not, send money to:

Heschel Memorial Forest Fund  
Trees for Vietnam  
211 Florida Ave. N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20036

Plant a tree in Appalachia where the strip mines have poisoned the forests. *Go there to plant it; start a kibbutz there and grow more trees.* Plant a tree in Brooklyn where the asphalt has buried the forest. *Go back there to plant it* and live with some of the old Jews who still live there. If policemen come to save the asphalt, keep planting. Offer everybody a turn with the shovel.

2. "Mashiah will come when the whole Jewish People keeps/remembers Shabbat twice in a row" (Talmud, Shabbat 118b).

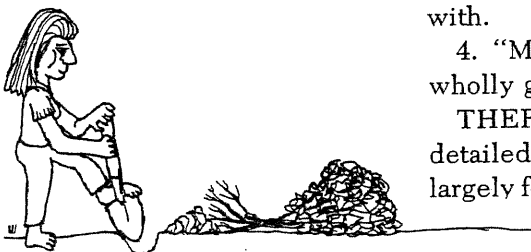
THEREFORE: Forget about all the things you *mustn't* do on Shabbat, and instead think of all the things you would most *like* to do on Shabbat (and forever). Do them. Read Torah with some friends and talk about it; walk on grass barefoot; look very carefully at a flower without picking it; give somebody something precious and beautiful without asking him to pay you; give love. Since it's not enough to do this alone (see the prediction), pick out a few Jews on the street, tell them it's Shabbat, and dance a horah with them (or the kazatsky, if you're into Yiddish).

3. "The nations . . . shall beat their swords into plowshares. . . . They shall never again know war" (Isaiah 2:4).

THEREFORE: Get together a minyan and travel up to West Point. Take along ten swords and a small forge. Put the small forge in the main entrance, start it glowing, and beat the swords into something like a digging tool. Dig holes for ten trees, and plant the trees in the roadway. Meanwhile, sing "Lo yisah goy" and "Ain't Gonna Study War No More" alternately, and if any West Pointers stop to see what's going down, offer them a reworked sword to dig with.

4. "Mashiah will come when one generation is either wholly innocent or wholly guilty" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a).

THEREFORE: Analyze the tax system of the United States, and publish a detailed answer to these two questions: (a) Are United States taxes used largely for purposes prohibited by Torah (e.g., oppressing the poor, destroying



trees, etc.)? (b) Are any Jews in the United States successfully avoiding payment of all taxes? If the answer to (a) is "Yes" and to (b) is "No," proclaim that the entire generation is guilty *in fact*, regardless of their personal opinions. Ask all shuls to include the proclamation in their Shabbat prayers with strong kavvanah: "HaShem, we are at last *all* guilty: send him!"

5. "And a woman shall conceive and bear in the same day [i.e., without pain]" (Midrash on Jeremiah). "See whether a man doth travail with child; wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail. . . Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it" (Jeremiah 30: 6-7).

THEREFORE: If you're a man, practice having a baby. Whether you're a man or woman, take a class in the Lamaze method of trained, fully awake childbirth. Learn and practice the exercises. If you're an expectant father, take as much time off from work as your wife/lover does (before and after the birth), and try to experience fully what giving birth and baby care mean.

6. "For the Lord hath created a new thing in the earth: a woman [nekevah] shall court a man [warrior]" (Jeremiah 31:22).

THEREFORE: If you're a woman, surround the nearest warrior type with a ring of laughing, singing women. If he threatens you with a gun, ask seventeen of your sisters to join you in taking it away from him—gently. But more important, whether you're a man or a woman let the female *within you* encompass the warrior *within you*. Let that soul of yours which is open, receptive, enveloping, envelop that soul of yours which is angry, threatening, thrusting.

7. "In that day shall the Lord [Adonai] be one [Ehad], and His name one" (Zechariah 14:9).

THEREFORE: When you pray and come to "Adonai" in the prayer, either *think* "Ehad" with full kavvanah at the same time you are saying "Adonai," or *say* "Ehad" while you think "Adonai."

8. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi found Elijah the prophet, disguised as a leper, begging at the gates of Rome. "When will you come to proclaim the Mashiah?" he asked. "Today, . . . if you will hear his voice," replied Elijah (Talmud Babli, Sanhedrin 98a).

THEREFORE: Hear his voice. Open yourself to hear it. Practice saying, "Hineni"—"Here I am"—in a sense of total openness.

9. "In the days to come . . . instruction shall come forth from Zion" (Isaiah 2:1-3). Not out of Sinai. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, . . . not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I [led] them out of . . . Egypt. . . [Instead,] I will put My law [Torah] in their inward parts, and in their hearts will I write it. . . They shall teach no more every man his neighbour and every man his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord'; for they shall all know Me" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

THEREFORE: Stop teaching. Listen inward, inward to your own heart, for the new covenant: the covenant of the Torah from Zion. Listen especially for what is new about it.

10. Said a poor tailor one Yom Kippur, "I have committed only minor offenses; but You, O Lord, have committed grievous sins: You have taken away babies from their mothers, and mothers from their babies. Let us be quits: may You forgive me, and I will forgive You." Said Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev to the tailor, "Why did you let Him off so easily? You might have forced Him to redeem all of Israel!"

THEREFORE: Do not let God off so easily. Hear His/Her voice, but challenge His/Her answer. Wrestle mightily; like Yaakov, you may win. *Keep on wrestling!*



From: Telling your children about God David Wolpe  
from Richard Joel

A story is told of a young child who is busy with pencils, pens, and crayons, working earnestly on a drawing. His father comes up behind him and asks, "Son, what are you drawing?"

"I'm drawing a picture of God, Dad," the child replied.

"Son, don't you know that no one knows what God looks like?"

"Well," he replies, "they will when I'm finished."

[rabbi mark kram]

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.  
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,  
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall  
And they laugh behind heavy curtains  
In their hotels.  
They have their pictures taken  
Together with our famous dead  
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb  
And on the top of Ammunition Hill.  
They weep over our sweet boys  
And lust over our tough girls  
And hang up their underwear  
To dry quickly  
In cool, blue bathrooms.

by  
Yehuda  
Amichai

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

# Jewish hunger and baking halla on Jupiter

Joshua Hammerman

**D**ESPITE all the predictions, the Messiah hasn't come yet. And so life goes on for us, the unredeemed of the Diaspora. Our certificates will have a chance to mature in US banks for a while longer; we can unpack our bags and settle back in our easy chairs for at least a couple more Super Bowls.

No one in my community is particularly upset that history has come down on the side of Apocalypse Later. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's timing was a little off - he should have known that the Messiah cannot possibly arrive until Israel is completely wired for cable.

Yet there is a disconcerting aspect to all this. While Lubavitcher-promoted messiah madness was big news in Israel and for a smattering of Jews in the US, few American Jews really cared. And those who did notice the full-page ads in *The New York Times* calling on us to

prepare for redemption mostly viewed the matter as another case of fringe fanaticism, courtesy of the "Crown Heights crazies."

Most US Jews do not understand that the messianic idea remains cardinal to Judaism. The vast majority

of stern Hebrew school teachers until you either turn blue in the face or give up and call yourself a Jew.

The chain argument worked wonders with Michael Steadman in the now-famous "Bris" episode of TV's *thirtysomething*. The problem with the chain is that we know where it came from - but where is it leading? Why keep it going? Why is it there at all? Steadman never cared to ask.

There is a small minority of Jews who actually feel that the Jewish people can make a difference in the world. For that we can thank Reform Judaism, which saved the prophetic message of social justice for the rest of us. But in doing so, it downplayed classical messianism and all but eliminated the concept of a personal messiah.

Unfortunately, the messianic idea does not work as an abstraction. Messianism without a messiah is like Shabbat without halla - tasteless and devoid of texture. It leaves a deep hunger unsatisfied. The Talmudic sages understood: they knew that this profound hunger could energize the Diaspora.

These days, the only Jews who unabashedly and openly yearn for a personal Messiah are various Hasidic sects and the Jews for Jesus. The rest of us observe them and either laugh or shudder, correctly rejecting the fundamentalist naivete of the former and the Christological overtones of the latter.

But then we make the mistake of tossing out the baby with the bathwater. In spite of the miracles we've witnessed in recent years, including the establishment of a Jewish state, we remain unredeemed. Are we too comfortable, too sedentary, to yearn the way our ancestors used to yearn, to ache for a true redemption?

Well, move over, Reb Schneerson. I yearn for the Messiah too. It's time for the rest of Diaspora Jewry to reclaim Him - or Her - as our own. Judaism is one of the most pragmatic and realistic religions on earth, but without this fundamental optimism at its core, and without it being expressed intimately and concretely, it isn't Judaism.

Without the messianic idea to inspire us, we couldn't have survived two millennia of Exile. For the Diaspora to survive now, we'd best start dreaming messianic dreams again and figuring out how to bake halla on Jupiter.

Rabbi Hammerman is associated rabbi of Temple Beth El in Stamford, Connecticut.

## 'Move over, Reb Schneerson. I yearn for the Messiah, too'

of them do not take messianism seriously - and that has implications of apocalyptic proportions for Judaism in America.

A few months ago, I asked a class of 25 sixth-grade Hebrew school students at my Conservative synagogue what they thought would happen at the End of Days.

One by one, they spun tales of horror and total extermination. Some said the sun would eventually burn us to a crisp. But not to worry, it wouldn't happen for a few billion years. Others were less optimistic. Atomic annihilation was a popular choice, notwithstanding the tempo-

that something good might happen at the end. Was there anything at all to hope for, to work toward?

One lone girl raised her hand and said bravely, "Well, I guess if we work hard to improve things, we can make anything possible. Maybe we could colonize another planet before ours is destroyed."

"Maybe," I said, grasping at her answer. Okay, so a Hadassah chapter on Jupiter is hardly my conception of Paradise; but it was something.

**A** random sampling of recent major surveys of American Jewry indicates a prevailing anti-messianic sentiment. How do I know? Because the question, "Do you believe in an ultimate redemption, a messiah or messianic age?" is nowhere to be found. Nothing even close to it appears in the highly-touted CJF survey, for example, which had no problem at all measuring Sabbath observance, kashrut or household income.

In spite of our inbred Jewish sense that patience and dedication will allow goodness to prevail and our home-grown American spirit of manifest destiny and can-do, our children look to the future and see nukes.

Ask an American Jew why he remains Jewish. Precious few will say, "to forge a perfect society to bring about the End of Days." After a dozen years of Reagan-Bush, the American idea of utopia has come to mean low interest rates and a high GNP; there isn't a New Frontier or Great Society to be found. And after the Holocaust and more recent triumph of Revisionist Zionism, Jews increasingly see themselves as inhabitants of a Hobbesian, brutish world.

Most American Jews remain Jewish for reasons that reek with pessimism, such as Emil Fackenheim's 614th commandment: not to grant Hitler a posthumous triumph. Then there is this idea of the continuing chain, yanked by hundreds of generations of dead relatives and a cadre

JERUSALEM POST

4/92

RABBI JOSHUA J. HAMMERMAN

TEMPLE BETH EL  
350 ROXBURY ROAD  
STAMFORD, CT 06902

(203) 322-6901



**There is a Jewish vision of history.** The Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash and other Jewish works teach that history is evolving in a specific direction—to one specific end. Unlike Charles Darwin who believed in the "survival of the fittest," Jews believe that the righteous will survive. While the world we know is filled with injustice, violence and suffering, the Jewish tradition teaches that at some point in human history this will end. When the teachings of the Torah are universal, the kind of global suffering we now know will end. The end of history will be the beginning of a time when all people live together in peace and justice. In the Bible, the prophets label this "the end of days" or "the redemption". We are taught that God created people and gave the Torah to the Jewish people just in order to evolve that kind of world.

**When Will the Messiah Come?** Somewhere between the end of the biblical period and the evolution of rabbinic Judaism, the coming of the redemption was equated with the coming of the messiah. *Mashiach*, the Hebrew word for Messiah, means "anointed one." Tradition suggests that the person who redeems Israel and brings the world to the Kingdom of God will be a descendant of King David, a member of the "anointed" family. The messiah is to be a prophet, a warrior, a judge, a king and a teacher of Torah.

While the Bible never directly teaches that a single person, a messiah, will lead the world to redemption, the idea of the messiah who is a descendant of King David's family is evolved from three biblical concepts.

**A Talmudic Dialogue Sanhedrin 96b-99a** \*In the book of Samuel II and in certain Psalms, the Bible makes it clear that the LORD chose David and his family to rule eternally over Israel and also to have dominion over alien peoples.

\*After the fall of David's house, it was possible to find in the words of certain prophets (Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah) as well as in certain Psalms, the hope that the descendants of David would again rule over Israel.

\*In the writings of Isaiah and Daniel we find the idea that the "redeemer" of Israel would be distinguished by a commitment to justice.

Somehow, these ideas merged into a vision of a King Messiah, descendant of David, who would lead Israel and the world into a new era. Elijah, the prophet who didn't die on earth and who was carried alive to heaven in a fiery chariot, was to return and announce the Messiah's coming. We don't know the exact origins of this idea, but in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 96b-99a) we have a transcript of a conversation among the rabbis about when they expect the Messiah to come. From this dialogue, we can discover much of the rabbinic vision of the Messiah and the Messianic Era.

### One Basic Insight

On the surface, this conversation seems to center on the question, "Do we know when the Messiah is coming? The real question however, is "Can people's actions effect the coming of the Messiah?" You will find three basic answers:

1. No. The coming of the Messiah is part of God's plan and we have no control over it.
2. Yes. When people achieve a good and just society (and have thus earned the Messiah), God will send him.
3. Sort of. If or when the world is in so much trouble that there is no other hope (and people can't do it on their own) then God will use the Messiah to fix things up.

R. NACHMAN: Have you heard when *Bar Nafle* is coming?

RASHI: *Bar Nafle* is an Aramaic and Greek expression which means "son of the fallen."

RABBI ISAAC: Who is *Bar Nafle*?

R. NACHMAN: The Messiah.

RABBI ISAAC: How can you call the Messiah *Bar Nafle*?

R. NACHMAN: It is obvious. In the Book of Amos, it says (Chapter 9, Verse 11): "I will raise up the Tabernacle of David *ha nofelet* (which has fallen)." The Messiah is the son of the fallen who will be lifted up.

RABBI ISAAC: Rabbi Yochanan answered your question: "In the generation when the Messiah comes, there will be few scholars--the rest of the people's eyes will fail because of grief and sorrow. There will be much trouble and evil decrees will be pronounced. Each new evil will begin before the previous evil has ended."

NARRATOR: This is like a teaching of our Rabbis:

RABBINIC CHORUS: There is a seven-year cycle which will end with the coming of the Messiah. In the *first year* the prophecy of Amos will be fulfilled: "*I will cause it to rain upon one city, and not allow it to rain upon another city.*" In the *second year* there will be arrows of hunger.

RASHI: Arrows of hunger means a food shortage, not a famine. People will be hungry, not starving.

RABBINIC CHORUS: In the *third year* there will be a great famine. Men, women, children, *tzadikim* and scholars will die. The Torah will be forgotten. In the *fourth year* there will be partial plenty. In the *fifth year* there will be great plenty. In the *sixth year* there will be Heavenly sounds.

RASHI: Heavenly sounds could mean either Heavenly voices announcing the coming of the Messiah or the sounding of the Great Shofar.

RABBINIC CHORUS: In the *seventh year* there will be wars - and at the end of this cycle of seven years, the son of David will come.

RABBI JOSEPH: We've had lots of seven years cycles, why hasn't the Messiah come?

ABAYE: Come on. We've never heard "the sounds of Heaven" in the sixth year or "the final wars" in the seventh. We've had lots of troubles—but they've never come in the exact order.

RABBI JUDAH: In the generation when the Messiah comes, the house of assembly will be made up of harlots...

RASHI: House of assembly means the place where scholars gather to learn Torah.

RABBI JUDAH: ...the Galilee will be in ruins; the Golan will be desolate; those people living along the borders of Israel will wander from city to city and no one will give them hospitality; wisdom will be out of style; God-fearing people will be hated; people will be dog-faced; and there will be no such thing as the truth...

R. NEHORI: In the generation when the Messiah comes, young men will insult the old, and old men will serve the young; daughters will rise up against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. The people will be dog-faced; and children will not show honor to their parents.

R. NECHEMIAH: In the generation of the Messiah, rudeness will be on the rise, the important people will all be perverted. The son of David will not come until the whole world is converted to heresy.

NARRATOR: Our rabbis taught:

RABBI I: The son of David will not come until there are lots of doubters.

RABBI II: Until there are almost no scholars.

RABBI III: Until the world is bankrupt.

RABBI IV: Until people give up hope of redemption.

NARRATOR: When Rabbi Zera used to run into people trying to figure out when the Messiah was coming, he would tell them:

RABBI ZERA: Do me a favor - don't bother trying to predict the coming of the Messiah. Three things can't be predicted: The Messiah; finding something someone else lost; and a scorpion bite. Trying to predict it only keeps him from coming...

NARRATOR: Rabbi Chanan ben Tachlifa once sent a letter to Rabbi Joseph.

RABBI CHANAN: I once met a man who had a document written in ancient Hebrew. I asked him how he got it and he told me, "I took a job working for the Roman army, and found it in their archives." This document said that 4,231 years after the creation, the world will be orphaned. Following this, some years will be spent in the war of Gog and Magog...

RASHI: The war of Gog and Magog is the apocalypse, the final war.

RABBI CHANAN ...and the rest of the time will be the Messianic era. The Holy One who is to be Blessed will redeem the world after 7,000 years.

R. ACHA BEN RABA: Wrong, the document said 5,000 years.

R. SAMUEL b. NACHMANI: Rabbi Yonatan used to teach: Blasted be the bones of those who try to calculate the end. Their only purpose is to say that the predetermined time has come and the Messiah still hasn't come. Therefore, the Messiah isn't coming. Even though we *shouldn't* calculate, we *should* still wait for him....it is God's commitment to justice which keeps the Messiah from coming.

RASHI: The Messiah will not come until human behavior is just—and we earn his coming.

R. SAMUEL b. NACHMANI: Even if God's commitment to justice delays the coming of the Messiah, the Prophet Isaiah (30.18) teaches us that we will be rewarded for waiting and hoping. Isaiah teaches: *Blessed are they who wait for him.*

RAV: All the predestined dates for the redemption have passed. Now the redemption depends only on repentance and good deeds.

NARRATOR: There was an argument between two sages:

RABBI ELIEZER: If Israel repents they will be redeemed; if Israel does not repent, they will not be redeemed.

RABBI JOSHUA: You are both right and wrong. If Israel repents they will be redeemed, if Israel ~~does not repent,~~ they will not be redeemed. But God will make them serve a King who is as cruel as Haman—and this will lead Israel to repent.

RABBI ZE'RAI: Rabbi Chanina taught that the son of David will not come until no one in Israel is conceited....

- R. YOCHANAN: The Messiah will come when a generation gives up any kind of hope for his coming. The son of David will come only in a generation which is totally righteous, or in a generation which is totally wicked.
- NARRATOR: Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's tomb.
- RABBI JOSHUA: Have I a portion in the world to come?
- ELIJAH: If God wills it.
- RABBI JOSHUA: When will the Messiah come?
- ELIJAH: Go and ask him.
- RABBI JOSHUA: Where?
- ELIJAH: He is sitting among the poor lepers. All of the lepers tie and untie all of their bandages at once. The Messiah is doing it one bandage at a time.
- NARRATOR: Rabbi Joshua went to the Messiah.
- RABBI JOSHUA: Shalom Alechem Rabbi and Teacher.
- MESSIAH: Alechem Shalom Son of Levi.
- RABBI JOSHUA: When will you come?
- MESSIAH: Today.
- NARRATOR: On his way back he met Elijah again.
- ELIJAH: What did he say?
- RABBI JOSHUA: Alechem Shalom Son of Levi.
- ELIJAH: That means you've got a portion in the world to come.
- RABBI JOSHUA: But he lied to me. He said that he would come today. He hasn't come.
- ELIJAH: What he meant was for you to read Psalm 95 verse 7. It says: *Today, if you hear His voice.*

## THOUGHTS

1. Put an A next to each speech which suggests that people's actions will have no effect on the coming of the Messiah.
2. Put a B next to each speech which suggests that people's actions can bring the Messiah (but only if they are bad enough and God has no other choice).
3. Put a C next to each speech which suggests that people's actions can earn the Messiah's coming by improving the world on their own.

NOTE: Some speeches may have more than one letter. What is your belief about the end of history? What kind of future can people create?

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