



## ISSUES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

### THE MESSIANIC AGE

— a personal view

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## Foreword

Orthodox Judaism has long accepted and even encouraged the questioning mind. As Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, President of Bar Ilan University has put it:—

"A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty, not only because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, but also because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility, and consequently its greater potential ultimately to discover its Creator."

*("One Man's Judaism")*

The problem for the modern Jew is not that he has questions but that he does not know where to find the answers. It is in the spirit of Rabbi Rackman's advice that Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks in this series "Issues in Jewish Thought" provides a route map for the journey to greater understanding. The booklets are brief and to the point, providing an introduction to Jewish thinking on each of the issues treated. The booklets should be particularly useful in forming the basis of an adult education programme or a study or discussion group at local synagogues. We are fortunate in having in Rabbi Sacks, a teacher who combines breadth and depth of learning with great clarity of exposition.

This series is part of an ambitious programme of publications on which the United Synagogue is embarked and in which Rabbi Sacks, holder of the Sir Immanuel Jakobovits Chair in Modern Jewish Thought at Jews College will play a prominent part. A second volume in this series is being published simultaneously and a third is being planned.

The programme also includes plans to produce a substantial series of practical guides to Judaism, the first volume being on Shabbat, and more basic pamphlets of instruction in Jewish ritual and practice. Through this range of publications it is hoped that members of the United Synagogue will increase their understanding of and strengthen their commitment to traditional Jewish values and practices, and thus enrich their experience of Jewish living.

Leslie Wagner  
Chairman, Adult Education  
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"Even though he may be delayed, despite it all I wait for him each day". With these words, sad yet defiant, taken from a version of Maimonides' principles of faith, we proclaim our belief in the coming of the Messiah. Distant though the hope has often seemed, more than any other it has made Judaism what it is: a religion whose present is made bearable by thoughts of the future, in which our sufferings and insecurity will come to an end.

The Messiah has, as the words imply, been a long time coming. But he was always just about to come. The Hassidic master, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, was angry when he discovered that a scribe, in drawing up his son's engagement contract, had written that the marriage would take place at such and such a date in Berditchev. He ordered him to rewrite it: The marriage will take place on that date in the holy city of Jerusalem — unless by some chance, the Messiah has not come by then; in which case the ceremony will take place in Berditchev. Berditchev it proved to be.

Some thousand and half years earlier the Amoraic teacher, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, met the prophet Elijah standing by the entrance of the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He asked him, 'When will the Messiah come?' Elijah replied, 'Go and ask him yourself.' — 'Where is he sitting?' — 'At the entrance of Rome.' — 'How shall I recognise him?' — 'He is sitting among the poor lepers. The others change their bandages all at once. He changes them one by one, so as to be ready immediately should he be needed.' Rabbi Joshua ben Levi went and sought the Messiah. He found him and said, 'Peace to you, Master and Teacher.' — 'Peace to you, ben Levi.' — 'When will you come, Master?' — 'Today', the Messiah replied. When Rabbi Joshua next met Elijah, he reported the conversation. He added, 'He spoke falsely. For he said he would come today, and he has not.' Elijah replied, 'This is what he said: "Today — if you will listen to His voice" (Psalm 95:7). If Israel repented. If they kept two Sabbaths. If they would just turn around — they would see the Messiah already behind them. Needless to say — they didn't.

Two attitudes, then, strangely juxtaposed: the Messiah was just around the corner; and he was nowhere in sight. So strong was the

sense, at times, that the more fervently we waited the longer he would take, that we find two strong cautions in the Talmud. The Messiah will not come, said the rabbis, until we have despaired of redemption. He will not come, said Rabbi Zera, until we are thinking of something else and he catches us unawares.

What is it that we expect? Is the Messiah a person, or the name of an age? Will it be a natural or a miraculous event? Will the world be largely unchanged, or will it be — as some said — that we will wake up one morning and as soon as we open our eyes we will know that the time has come? Has the idea, with all its expectations and disappointments, become discredited? Does it rest on an impossible conception of the future? And how did the Messianic hope enter Judaism in the first place?

There are those who suggest that the idea of a Messiah is a relatively late one in the history of Judaism, in some of its features post-Biblical, in others, the vision of the later prophets. In fact, though, in an important sense the idea was born at the very beginning of Judaism. Abraham is called to leave his home and go to a land, the land of Canaan, which God will give to his descendants as an everlasting possession. The promise is repeated to Isaac and Jacob in turn, but it is fulfilled in none of them. Moses is summoned to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, so that the covenant with the Fathers can be realised at last. He does so, but even then God does not lead them directly into the land: the people are not ready for it. Then spies are sent to prepare plans for the conquest; ten of the twelve lose heart, and the Israelites with them; the result is that the entry is delayed by forty years. Even Moses is not allowed to cross the Jordan. And the Chumash ends with the dream still in abeyance.

The conquest takes place, but it is not until the time of David that the ideal of a unified and dedicated nation begins to seem real. David is a **mashiach**, an anointed king; and the hope was that his rule would be continued by his dynasty for all time. It was not to be: moral collapse, the division of the kingdom, defeats, and eventually the destruction of the Temple and the captivity by Babylon, seemed to make a mockery of the hopes that had always been cherished. But if the faith which the Fathers had carried with them meant anything, then

it meant this: that Israel would once again regain its land and its autonomy, the throne of David would be restored, the enemies with which the country was surrounded would cease their periodic attacks, and a reign of justice would be instituted. The laws which Moses had transmitted would become — as they had been intended to be — the living constitution of a nation. And Israel, by the manner of its existence, would be an example which the world would admire and recognise as a model of obedience to God.

This, despite the differences of emphasis from time to time and from prophet to prophet, is the essence of the messianic hope. The Messiah — the anointed king — would be a descendant of David, following his example. The Messianic Age would be the new era of return, stability, and rededication, which he instituted and subsequent generations perpetuated. And it is clear that both ideas are implicit in the earliest words of God to Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you great. You shall become a blessing." The Messianic idea is a kind of commentary to that verse, as if to say: Do not think that it has happened yet; but do not think that it will not.

The entire history of the Torah is a constant cycle of exiles and returns, exiles prompted by moral failures of one kind or another, returns brought about by a desire to begin again to live in obedience to the commands. Yet against this is an assurance that one day the cycle will come to an end, and Israel will no longer be driven from their land. Perhaps the most striking prophecy of all is the series of warnings given by Moses just before his death, before the Israelites have even crossed the Jordan. The people will, he predicts, ignore his words: "I am aware of your rebellious spirit and your stubbornness. Even while I am here alive with you, you are rebelling against God. What will you do after I am dead?" (Devarim 31:27). But if they do so, a terrible fate is in store for them: "Your sons and your daughters will be given to a foreign nation . . . You will become a horror, a byword and an object-lesson to all the peoples amongst whom God disperses you . . . God will scatter you among the nations, from one end of the earth to the other . . . Your life will hang in suspense, fear will beset you night and day, and you will find no security all your life long" (Devarim 28). In the midst of tragedy, Israel will find its way back to God: "There, among the nations

where God will have banished you, you will reflect on your situation. you will then return to God your Lord . . . God your Lord will once again gather you . . . Even if your diaspora is at the ends of the heavens, God your Lord will gather you up from there and He will take you back" (Devarim 30:1-4).

These prophecies are doubly fearful, first because they were spoken so early, second because they proved so accurate: closer, in fact, to the fate of the Jewish people after the Biblical period than during it. Many of the warnings and consolations of the book of Devarim read more like a foresight of the twentieth century than of any other age.

The greatest visions of the Messianic future were born in the Babylonian exile, but they were not destined to be realised; not, at any rate, in the way that the prophets hoped. Cyrus of Persia, who allowed the Jews to return, was even described by Isaiah as "the anointed" of God (Isaiah 45:1), not meaning that he was the Messiah but at least suggesting that he was setting the great process in motion. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah saw profound significance in the rebuilding of the Temple by Zerubbavel. Momentum flagged as the Jewish community in Israel was beset by internal difficulties. Ezra and Nehemiah again brought the people a sense of commitment. But the land continued to be subjected to the sway of great empires — Persian, Greek, and the rival Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties. The Maccabean revolt restored autonomy; but it too came to an end with the Roman conquest and the destruction of the second Temple. Hope was revived briefly by the Bar Kochba rebellion: the Talmud Yerushalmi tells us that Rabbi Akiva saw in him a Messianic figure.

Hopes and disappointments. Enough, one would have thought, to have made Jews stop hoping. But in fact, the preservation of the dream was not based on mere wishful thinking, or on a fear of facing up to reality. Nor was it irrational faith. First: the very sense of a better future allowed Judaism to survive into the future. Here, more than anywhere else, we witness the incontrovertible power of faith to change the world. More even amongst non-Jews than amongst Jews, the survival of the people of Israel is seen as a self-evident miracle, against every law or probability. That we would endure was part of the Messianic faith; but it was also in no small measure **brought about by** that faith.

Second: it can be argued — with as much certainty as we can achieve in the realm of might-have-been — that the failures after the return from Babylon were not a matter of Messianic hopes raised too high, but of their not being taken seriously enough. Herzl's maxim that "If you will it, it is no dream", has a corollary: "If you do not will it, it will remain a dream". In the Talmud we find Resh Lakish interpreting a verse to mean, "Had you made yourself like a wall and had all come up in the days of Ezra, you would have been like silver which never decays. Instead you came up like doors (little by little), so you became like cedar-wood which becomes rotten with damp". The ideal of rebuilding Zion had too slow an effect on the Jews of Babylon. Not that many returned; and not all at once. Conditions in Babylon were good; those in Israel, difficult. Resh Lakish's judgement in retrospect is that the dream of Isaiah was a real possibility, and that the moment proved to be a fatefully lost opportunity. Judah Halevi, in the twelfth century, concurred: "Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at first, if they had all willingly consented to return. But only a part was ready to do so, whilst the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylon . . . unwilling to leave their houses and their affairs" (Kuzari 2:24). The point he makes is fundamental; all the more so when we remember that it was to be another seven hundred years before Zionism became a broad-based and activist movement. Messianic belief does not consist in believing that something will happen and waiting for it: it is the willingness to **make it happen**. "Jerusalem can only be rebuilt when Israel yearns for it to such an extent that they embrace her stones and dust" (Kuzari 5:27).

At all events, the long night of exile began; and the rabbis provided what was to prove the one-sentence history of the Jewish soul over eighteen centuries: "I sleep, but my heart is awake" (Song of Songs 5:2), which they interpreted to mean, "I have fallen asleep waiting for the end of exile, but my heart is awake to redemption". The longing was still there, but in the heart rather than the deed. And in this situation, there were dangers.

They were three in number: impatience, despair and imagination. The most obvious danger is impatience, a sense of having waited too

long. The dam of frustrated feeling may burst, and if it does, the consequence may be a flood of belief that the Messiah has already arrived. The most famous of these occurrences within Judaism was that associated with the false Messiah Shabbatai Zevi, and excitement at the claims of his followers spread throughout the Jewish world, overflowing even into some Christian circles, in the years 1665-1666 CE. The movement came to an end with Shabbatai's enforced conversion to Islam.

More agitated, though, was the period before, during, and after the destruction of the Second Temple. In several of the Jewish sects there were intense Messianic preoccupations; miracle-workers, visionaries and would-be redeemers abounded. Some groups were apocalyptic, that is, concerned with revelation of the cosmic upheavals that would precede the arrival of a wholly new order of nature. Others, like the circle which followed Judah the Galilean, were more narrowly and actively interested in restoring the nation by taking up arms against the Romans. From one of these groups, Christianity emerged. Its adherents believed that the Messiah had come, though very rapidly its Messianic idea evolved away from any Jewish conception. Under the influence of Paul, new doctrines appeared: the Messiah was not just an agent of God but a being with the power to redeem; with his death the burden of sin was lifted from mankind; the old covenant with Israel was at an end; the Torah was dead; all of humanity was invited to join in salvation.

Such notions were foreign and distressing to Judaism. To speak of a Messianic figure as divine in this sense was impossible; to suggest that he had come when Israel remained under foreign rule was absurd. But it was only this variant which gave cause for concern: the failure of the Zealots and later Bar Kochba to achieve military victory suggested that militant Messianism was not the way for the time. Rabbis like Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai urged patience, and a readiness to get on with the task of reconstruction. He said "If you have a plant in your hand, and you are told that the Messiah has come, first plant the plant, and then go forth to welcome him". Rabbi Jonathan warned of the danger of trying to predict the date when redemption would come: "Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the End, for they used to say,

'Since the time for the End has come, but he has not arrived, he will never come'."

There are even some statements in the rabbinic literature which — possibly motivated by the dangers of attaching Messianic hopes to particular people — deny that the redemption will be brought about by any specific human figure. Rabbi Hillel (a teacher of the Talmudic period, not to be confused with the earlier and more famous Hillel) said: "Israel will have no Messiah, for they have already enjoyed him in the days of Hezekiah". Another passage, from Midrash Tehillim, records this exchange between Israel and God: "Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Have you not already redeemed us by the hands of Moses, Joshua, the judges and the kings? yet we are again enslaved and put to shame, as if we had never been redeemed.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, 'In the past you were redeemed by human beings and your leaders were mortal, here one day and in the grave the next. Therefore your redemption was only temporary. But in the future, I who live for ever shall redeem you Myself, and the redemption shall be everlasting.'" On these views there will be a Messianic age but no Messiah as such. They represent very much a minority opinion, and Rabbi Hillel was strongly rebuked for his view. But they indicate this much, that what happens to the Jewish people at that time is more important than who brings it about.

A sense of despair can breed impatience; but it can also have the opposite result. It can lead to a kind of resignation. After Bar Kochba, the element of political and military activity tended to be played down as 'forcing the End'. Instead redemption was seen as brought about by supernatural causes, whether to coincide with some secret and pre-ordained date, or in response to Jewish repentance and good deeds, or through some mystic process. When the power of action is frozen, the imagination is set free; and the many versions of the Messianic scenario produced in the Middle Ages were vivid and powerful in their effect.

The variety and what must seem to us now as the implausibility of some accounts of the future should not mislead us. Certain elements, as

we have seen, are basic and common to Jewish belief. The ingathering of exiles, the restoration of Israel as a state, its revival as a religious centre — all these are crucial; and they were enough to make it clear that the Messiah had not come yet. But how that future was to be achieved, what Divine interventions and unexpected happenings would be necessary — on these, Jews reflected, and not unnaturally came up with different answers. Maimonides put the basic propositions clearly in the Mishne Torah: belief in a Messianic Age is fundamental to Judaism, but the details of how it will be, are not. Moreover, we do not know how it will be until it has happened. Only then will we be able to go back to the words of the prophets and see what was prediction and what was metaphor.

The very fluidity of the Messianic idea was of the greatest importance. Through the Torah and the commandments, Jews, wherever they were, were able to keep their link with the past. Through Messianic hope they were able — no less importantly — to preserve a route to the future. Sometimes that route passed through great mysteries; but that was no more than a reflection of the objective difficulties that stood in the way. "Next year in Jerusalem" may at times have seemed a long way off; but it was never a mere pious sentiment. The Jew faced the ruins of Jerusalem when he prayed; he saw the rebuilt Jerusalem when he reflected on the future.

In the nineteenth century, however, the concept underwent two dramatic transformations. In the wake of the emancipation of Jews in Europe, movements such as Reform Judaism saw the possibility of assimilation into a wider culture as real and desirable. The Jew could at last settle down as a tolerated citizen of a liberal state. But two things had to go. First, much of Jewish law, whose effect was to keep Jews as a people apart; second, the Messianic hope, which focussed the future on a departure from Europe. In its place came the idea, not of a person but of a phase of civilisation; not of a nation, but of the world. The Messianic Age would be an example to mankind of tolerance and rationality; all men would worship one God; peace and justice would reign. There would be no more talk of Jews going back to Israel. Far better for them to be good Germans or Frenchmen.

The second development grew out of an awareness of the weakness of the first. The great secular Zionists, Lilienblum, Pinsker and Herzl,

came to the conclusion that emancipation had not, and would not, put an end to antisemitism. Jews could not realistically hope to assimilate and be tolerated. They would remain outsiders, a much disliked minority. If they wanted to become normal, then they would have to do so within their own autonomous state. There they could settle down to becoming another nation, just like any other. It did not have to be in Israel; anywhere else would do. In the end, though they discovered that Jewish passions could not be aroused for other possible homes as much as they could for Zion.

Both movements broke with the traditional Jewish standpoint, that the destiny of the people of Israel lay in its uniqueness. Each sought a way out into normalcy, for the history of exile, persecution, powerlessness and disappointment had become too much to bear. In the twentieth century each was to receive its tragic refutation. The Jews who had sought to hide in European assimilation were ruthlessly tracked down and turned, by the Nazis, into ashes. Those who had hoped that the State of Israel would become just a nation like any other, have had ample demonstration that that too was misguided. One of the most awe-inspiring facts about the last hundred years is that the two major efforts to settle for something less than traditional Messianism proved to be wishful thinking, whilst the wholly improbably visions of Moses actually came to pass.

At the same time as these changes were occurring, there were naturally many orthodox Jews who were content to live as they had always done, and to wait for the Messiah to come without any special human assistance. But there were two, Rabbi Judah Alkalai and Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, who figured amongst the earliest Zionists, and whose reaction to the emancipation was to see that for the first time there were Jews of prominence — like Montefiore and the Rothschilds — able to set in motion the settlement of Israel. Their dream was the old one, but they sensed that a beginning could be made 'from below'. Several generations later, religious Zionism was to find its greatest poet and philosopher in Rav A.I. Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel. For him, the Messianic process was an evolutionary one, of the return of the Jewish people to its roots in its land and language, which would bet a new flowering of Torah and humanity.

Almost at the end of the book of Devarim there is a fearful prediction: "Beset by many evils and troubles, they will say, 'It is because my God is no longer with me that these evils have befallen us.' on that day I will utterly hide My face . . ." (Devarim 31:17-18). At no moment in Jewish history did that come so near to being true as during the Holocaust. Three years later, the State of Israel was proclaimed; and apocalypics had come true, that the Messianic process would be preceded by disaster.

Have the events of the last fifty years been truly Messianic? The simplest way to answer is to look, not at prophecies or philosophies, but at the order of events envisaged in the **Amidah** prayer. There, after a series of personal requests, are set out prayers for national revival. The first is that God should "gather us from the four corners of the earth"; the second, "restore our judges"; the third is a prayer against internal enemies, 'slanderers'; the fourth asks for mercy towards the righteous, the pious, the elders, and 'the remnants of the scribes'; the fifth is for the rebuilding of Jerusalem; the sixth, and properly Messianic, is for the restoration of autonomy, the revival of learning under 'the remnants of the scribes', and the rebuilding of Jerusalem — all these have happened, even if they are far from complete. We are on the brink of the sixth blessing.

Maimonides, in his **Hilchot Melachim**, provided the definitive account of the person and times of the Messiah. In the Messianic Age, he writes, there will be no miraculous change in the order of nature; nor should one try to predict on the basis of the prophetic and rabbinic writings when and how the process will evolve. All that is fundamental is that Jews will return to Israel, the country will be free and at peace, there will be no war or strife, and nothing will stand in the way of the reconstruction of Israel's religious institutions. As for the Messiah himself, he will not need to perform miracles. "If a king arises of the house of David, meditating in the Torah and performing precepts like his father David, in accordance with the Written and the Oral Law, and if he will compel all Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and repairs its breaches, and if he will wage the wars of the Lord, it can be assumed that he is the Messiah. If he succeeds in rebuilding the Temple and gathering the dispersed ones of Israel, it will then be

established beyond all doubt that he is the Messiah who will perfect the whole world to serve God together" (Hilchot Melachim 11:4).

Clearly, neither the age nor the person have yet arrived. But we are living, in a sense that has not been true for nearly two thousand years, of **real Messianic possibility**. The prayer for the State of Israel by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, calls it "the beginning of the dawn of our redemption". It is difficult, perhaps meaningless, to say whether this has happened because of our efforts or was thrust upon us. God's doing, or man's? Perhaps not even a prophet could say.

The sobering fact is that even the most powerful sense that the moment was at hand — expressed immortally in the last twenty-seven chapters of Isaiah — was not enough, without the total commitment to bring it about. Presented, as we have been, with another such moment, we know what is at stake if we do not seize it.

In the last chapter of his book, Isaiah speaks to a situation very much like ours. Not everything has been achieved, he says; but it is not nothing either. "Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Is a land born in one day? Is a nation brought forth at once?" (66:8). The miraculous speed with which Israel's recovery has begun, is in itself a wonder and a cause for thanks. The Messianic process is not fulfilled; it is only beginning. But if we would have patience and will-power, says Isaiah, then what has started will be completed: "Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth, says the Lord?" (66:9).

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The classic rabbinic discussion of this and related themes is to be found in the tenth chapter of Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin, available in English in the Soncino edition, translated, H. Freedman. The halachic

summation by Maimonides is contained in chapters 11 and 12 of **Hilchot Melachim**, at the end of the **Mishne Torah**. Maimonides' Hebrew style is so lucid that you should, if at all possible, attempt this in the original, in the edition **Rambam le-Am**, published by Mossad HaRav Kook, vol. 17, pp. 412-420. In particular, this edition restores a major section which had been removed by the censors. A superb analysis of rabbinic views is presented in E.E. Urbach, **The Sages**, Magnes Press, pp. 649-690. This is a difficult but indispensable book. There are important articles, including the one which gives the book its title, in G. Scholem, **The Messianic Idea in Judaism**, Schocken Books. And a simple introduction can be found in the articles, **Messiah** and **Messianic Movements**, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 11, pp. 1407-1427.



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