

Journey to the Heart of God: Part 2: The Gift of Hope

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Hatikvah, The Hope!

Hatikvah, the hope. That has been the Jewish primary tool over the ages. To mend a broken society, a broken world, and a broken heart: Hope! The main form it has taken for many years has been the fervent dream for the coming of the Messiah.

The Messiah was to be an agent of change, a bringer of transformation to a troubled world, to turn it into a place where Micah's words could come true, where, "Each person should sit under their vine and under their fig tree, and none shall make them afraid." The concept of Messiah was part of God's universal plan from the very beginning of creation. The name of the Messiah was chosen even before the world was created, taught our sages, but his actions would come only at the end of time and usher in a new age.

The more intolerable the world's persecution became, the more frantic our hopes and the wilder our messianic speculations. Although the main Messiah was to be a descendent of the House of King David and a bringer of peace, he was to be preceded by a more militant descendent of the Tribe of Joseph. This earlier agent was to wage war against the forces of evil and darkness to prepare the way for the Davidic Messiah, though he himself was to die in the process. Even the social class system was fodder for the Messianic idea-mill. One source proposed two Messiahs from two different castes, one from the priests and one from the commoners.

The tales that our ancestors told of the coming of the Messiah, even the most fantastic ones, show us that their hopes were very much the same as ours. Said the Talmudic Rabbi Samuel, "There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except that then there will cease the bondage of foreign powers....."

The Messiah will also come; say our sources, to ease the plight of those suffering the tyranny of poverty and illness. He is said to sit among the beggars at the gates of Rome, the running sores that cover his body, and theirs, encased in bandages. While all the other beggars remove and change their bandages all at once, the Messiah removes and changes his one at a time, to be always ready in case he is needed.

Though they had no ozone-layer depletion or nuclear waste to worry about, our ancestors also saw the damage we humans do to the ecology. They expressed their hopes for the safety of the earth, too, in the Messianic longings. The teacher wrote: "The voice of the turtle was heard in our land and the time had arrived for Israel to be redeemed." When even the lowly turtle could be heard, was taken care of and provided for, it would indicate that all was well with the world and the time for redemption was at hand. Caring for the earth and its plants and animals is more important, we are taught, than any abstract

redemption. "If there was a plant in your hand, and you are told, "The Messiah is here," go and plant the plant, and then go out to welcome him."

Most important of all, for the poor and the oppressed of the earth who cannot speak out against human devastation, there was hope itself. Thundered Rabbi Samuel, "Blasted be the bones of those who can predict the time of the coming of the Messiah." Why? Because if the fixed hour came and went, people would lose all hope and say, "The Messiah will never come."

A London Rabbi Hugo Gryn tells of an event he experienced in the German concentration camp in 1944. At a certain point during the winter, he relates, "My father who was my fellow prisoner, took me and some of our friends to a corner in an old barrack. He announced that it was the Eve of Chanukah, produced a curious shaped clay bowl, and began to light a wick immersed in his precious, but now melted, margarine ration. Before he could recite the blessing, I protested at his waste of food. He looked at me, then at the lamp, and finally said: "You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water. But we cannot live properly for three minutes without hope!"

We can live a long time, with hope. Our Messianic hopes have sustained us through persecution and brutality, war and turmoil, sustained us long enough to see some of them come true. After the six-day war in Israel in 1967, the first major cultural event was a concert on Mount Scopus, recently recaptured after 19 years in Arab hands. As people boarded the bus to take them up to the mountain, one man gave the driver an unused ticket that he had purchased in 1948, the last time the Jews had been in control there. He had held onto the ticket for 19 years, secure in the hope that someday he would be able to use it!

But when will the Messiah come? When will the waiting and hoping be over? When will the problems and turmoil of the world finally be ended?

In a very real sense, though it sounds strange and almost blasphemous to say it, the Messiah must never come, or we would lose all hope, lose the will as well to make our hopes come true. When Christianity began to teach that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah the Rabbis of the day responded: "Look around you. The beggars still sit at the gates. The cries of those being tortured in the Roman garrisons and nailed to crosses on hill tops still fill our ears. There is no food. There is only want and disease and misery. How can you say the Messiah has come?" The Christians insisted, but had to change their approach, which they did with stunning brilliance. "The Messiah has come the first time, they said, to show that such a thing is possible. There will be a second coming at some point in the future, when we merit it. At that time, we will see the redemption and all the changes for which we hope."

We Jews, of course, already had our hopes pinned to the far future, and so had little need to agree that the Messiah had paid us a brief visit. But in all fairness, our tradition did flirt about 100 years after Jesus' death, with the idea that Bar-kochva, leader of a disastrous

revolt against the Romans, was the Messiah. Rabbi Akiva declared him so, though it caused a schism and many, perhaps, most of his colleagues disagreed.

Why, then, did we Jews so stubbornly deny then, and continue to deny now, that the Messiah has come? To understand the answer to this question is to understand how a Jew wields the all-important tool of hope to mend our world.

For some Christians, Jesus is not the son of Joseph and Mary, but is thought to be divine, the Son of God. That is the crucial breaking point between Judaism and Christianity. We would not then, and will not now, or ever, accept that a human being is also a god.

What is Judaism saying by means of this refusal? Erich Fromm has spent most of a long and productive life on exploring the psychic and societal mechanisms through which we seek freedom and flee from it at the same time. In his book, Escape from Freedom, he shows how great masses of people are not yet able to deal with the freedom that culture and technology and affluence have provided. It makes them feel “isolated, and thereby, anxious and powerless.”

Escaping such feelings leads us in two equally negative directions. Either we compensate for our fear of powerlessness by assuming power over and tyrannizing others or we surrender all our power to some presumed authority and become the victims of dictatorships. Most of the turmoil in our world, whether we speak of the fantasizers of the evangelical and new age movements, or the fanaticism of the right-wing in Iran, Northern Ireland, or Israel can best be understood, to use Fromm’s idea as an “escape from freedom.”

To turn a leader into a god is to do just that, to surrender one’s autonomy, one’s responsibility, to become less than human in the same measure as the leader becomes more. That has always been a core insight of our Judaism. Stubbornly, tenaciously, we have held to the message of human effort, human responsibility, and fought anything that would diminish it. The Messiah is not divine. The Messiah is human, just like us. The Messiah is God’s agent, just as we are.

We liberal Jews have understood that the hope for a complete end to the world’s troubles and the hope for a divine Messiah to cause it is a dangerous fantasy. The danger lies in allowing the fantasy, the hope, to paralyze us, to help us escape from our freedom and to shirk our responsibilities. We Reform Jews have given up the fantasy of the Messiah as a person, or rather, of the Messiah as only one person. We’ve also given up on the idea of a once-and-for-all solution to reality’s problems. We look now to a Messianic Age, a time, very much like the present, when each of us does what we can to bring peace and plenty and an end to tyranny a little bit closer.

Nor is this quite as radical as it sounds. Even among the Messianic statements in the Jerusalem Talmud is the Dictum of Rabbi Hayya and Rabbi Simion that, “This is the way of Israel’s redemption: to begin with it comes little by little, but as it progresses it glows greater and greater.” Even those we view as most firmly rooted in tradition, the Hasidism of

Eastern Europe [and Eastern Parkway]; understand this crucial aspect of Messianic hope, though they are willing only to hint at it!

Elie Wiesel tells a story about a certain Rabbi who concluded that human suffering was beyond endurance. So, he went up to Heaven and knocked at the Messiah's gate. "Why are you taking so long?" he asked him. "Don't you know humanity is expecting you?" "It's not me they are expecting," answered the Messiah in anger, "Some are waiting for good health and riches. Others for serenity and knowledge. Or peace in the home and happiness. No, it's not me they are waiting."

At that point, the Rabbi lost patience and cried: "So be it!" If you have but one face, may it remain in shadow! If you cannot help people, all people, resolve their problems, all their problems, even the most insignificant, then stay where you are, as you are. If you still have not guessed, what you are – bread for the hungry, a voice for the old men without heirs, sleep for those who dread the night, if you have not understood all these and more: that every wait is a wait for you, then you are telling the truth. Indeed, it is not you that the human race is waiting for." Then the Rabbi came back to earth, gathered his disciples and forbade them to despair. "And now," he said, "the true waiting begins."

It's at that last point that we Reform Jews part company with such ideas. We must not wait. We must create. We know that merely to wait is to return to the paralysis of insisting on ultimate solutions and divine messiahs.

Who is the Messiah? You are, and you and you...we all are. We are all bringers of hope. We are all God's agents.

Are we doing our job? That is the question we should ask ourselves. Do we vote? Do we give Tzedakah? Do we help others and ourselves to face the insecurities of freedom with autonomy and strength? Do we wrestle with the muddy, murky, unbearably difficult problems of our people by helping to strengthen those in Israel and by building a strong Jewish community here at home? Do we have the strength to be a lovingly limited messiah and bring hope to the small part of God's universe we happen to touch?

Remember that even prayer can be an escape from freedom, an escape from bringing hope. To pray is not to do. To pray is to prepare to do. The meaning of our prayer lies not in the saying of the prayer, but in the doing that takes place after we leave here. To mend a broken world may each of us use the tool of hope, to bring hope to our people on our planet. If we do that, we will not need to ask, "When will the Messiah come?" Our action will be the answer.

Amen.

Thank You!!!