

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

The Messianic Age and Redemption



Context

What does it mean to speak about redemption, the Messiah or a Messianic Age in the context of Reform Judaism? The early Reformers removed many of the mentions of a personal Messiah and the desire to rebuild the Temple and its sacrificial practices, feeling these were not modes we wished to return to in a modern age. In that context, what resonance do these ideas hold for us in our lives? How do we interact with our formative texts when they present visions of a redeemed world to come?

*In these two articles, **Rabbi Sybil Sheridan** and **Rabbi Daniel Lichman** explore these questions in two very different ways.*

Content – The Messianic Age - Rabbi Sybil Sheridan

But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Eternal shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow to it. Many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Eternal, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and God will teach us the ways, and we will walk in God's paths; for Torah shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Eternal from Jerusalem. God shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide concerning far away strong nations; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every one under their vine and under their fig tree; and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Eternal God of hosts has spoken. (Micah 4:1-4)

Jewish time is linear, it had a beginning in the days of creation and it will come to completion, in a perfected world as envisioned here by the prophet Micah. The picture is universal, the site of the ancient Temple becoming the place where all nations come together, where all will recognise God, follow God's teachings and live in peace with one another.

How we get to this situation is not described. Rabbinic Judaism looked to one human being – the Messiah – a human who was God's anointed, who would restore the Kingship of the House of David and effect the return of the exiles to the Promised Land. However, for the biblical prophets, the focus is not on an individual, but on the age itself. Reform Judaism follows this focus, emphasising that the perfection of the world will not come about by someone else, but by we ourselves. We are not to sit back and wait, and pray for the coming of a person sent from on high to sort things out for us, each one of us has a responsibility to take our part in bringing it about. This is the fundamental purpose of tikkun olam the repairing of the world.

No one could argue against the world's need for repair, but the task seems hopeless in the light of humanity's cruelty, indolence and self-interest. It is just too much for one mere mortal. Nevertheless, we can see over history, how individuals working together, do effect great change. The abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, equal rights for gays and lesbians, are steps along the road to the acknowledgement of the right

and worth of every individual. The Prophets make it quite clear what that work involves;

Is it not to do justly, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6:8)

The pursuit of justice against the oppressor, of compassion towards the oppressed and the recognition that all humanity is b'tzelem Elohim - created in the image of God. These are the means that move us towards the Messianic Age.

All must engage in furthering this: in the words of Rabbi Tarfon, "It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it." (Pirkei Avot 2:16).

Rabbi Leo Baeck wrote:

There is no sentimentality in the messianic message. Since it is a message of commandment, it brings sufferings as well as consolation. There is here no mere dreaming about the future; for the man who dreams about the future does nothing about the present. There is a driving compelling element in this idea of peace that is well-nigh revolutionary. Every great idea, every conception thought out to the messianic end, means opposition; a commandment is paramount to a protest because it is not only concerned with the alleviation of the needs of the hour, but also demands the days to come... (The Essence of Judaism)

Though the end goal is world peace, the ideal is not pacifism, nor is it the peace of treaties at the end of war that are based on winners and losers. That notion continues the imbalance of power among peoples and nurtures the resentment that leads to dreams of revenge. The peace of the Messianic Age is a peace forged in complete mutuality. No one should be afraid that people may covet their vine or fig tree, no one will fear the loss of land or resources, no one will be humiliated. The world provides enough for everyone and sufficiency will take away the desire for war.

Not that poverty will be eradicated, 'The poor shall never cease from the land.' (Deuteronomy 15:11) Rather, we bring about the Messianic Age when we all accept fully our responsibility to care for the orphan, widow and stranger, so that no one shall go in want.

The Messianic Age is no different from our own, save in respect for peace. There will still be death, disease, inequalities of talent and opportunity, but as Moses Maimonides (Mishneh Torah Hilchot Melachim 12) says

There will not be in those days any famine, war, jealousy, or quarrel, because the good things will be in plenty and even luxuries will be found everywhere. All people will busy themselves with trying to know the Eternal. Therefore, the Israelites will be great sages, knowing things which are at present hidden. They will obtain a knowledge of their Creator as far as possible by human understanding; 'For the earth shall be full with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.' (Isaiah 11:9).

In this new age, it is not just Israel but people of all faiths who come to God. Micah's vision inspired the words of the Amidah.

All who inhabit the world shall meet in understanding.'
(Seder hat'fillot p311)

It takes place - not in some idealised future, but now... The timing of it indicated in the Psalm (95:7)

Today if you will only hear my voice.

Content – Redemption - Rabbi Daniel Lichman

We read in the news of the refugees who wander the world in search of a home; we hear testimonies from women of their experience of sexual harassment; and we experience loneliness. The world is un-redeemed. Ever since the great prophetic messianic visions of 'nations beating their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks', Jewish tradition has always insisted that redemption is coming: there is a future messianic age where refugees find homes, all are treated with dignity and we live with others in peace. The nineteenth century reformers, who founded Reform Judaism with a commitment to the spirit of Enlightenment rationalism, were careful to conceive of a messianism stripped of the more bizarre supernatural trappings that had accumulated around the doctrine. Instead of an individual messiah, they referred to the messianic age; instead of praying for a restoration of temple sacrifices and end of exile, they focused on the prophetic promise of peace and harmony in the countries in which they had recently been granted citizenship; instead of waiting for God to send a messiah, human beings would bring the messianic age through a commitment to ethical action. These reformers were full of hope in humanity: they saw the path to redemption in western European modernity which had emancipated them and promised, through rationalism and democracy, a pathway towards the perfection of humanity and peace. Western modernity was their messiah.

The twentieth century shattered this hopefulness. The ravages of the First World War undermined the Enlightenment faith in rationalism; the Shoah then broke our faith in humanity. It turned out that history is not the story of a linear progress towards the good that the messianism of the reformers promised it would be.

For many Jews in the generation after the Shoah Jewish messianic hope coalesced around Zionism: the state of Israel was understood as, in the words of the orthodox siddur, 'the flowering of our redemption'. Whilst this moved a generation of British Jews towards the possibility of a proud affirmation of Jewishness, it has left a younger generation confused, disappointed and often angry.

Meanwhile, contemporary politics has led liberals to despair as our core principles are undermined and challenged across the globe. Our repeated calls for 'tikun olam' (the repair of the world) are inadequate for the task ahead. A renewed Reform Jewish messianic theology (RJmt) is needed.

My guide as I seek RJmt is the twentieth century secular thinker Walter Benjamin. He understood the profound crisis in 1930s European politics to have arisen out of the conception of history as linear. Instead politics, he argued, required theology: Benjamin recognised that messianism could offer an alternative to linear history and the possibility of transforming society. This messianic history would understand that it is in the forgotten, discarded moments from the past that 'messianic sparks' lie which can enable us to conceive of new possibilities for the future.

We might begin our search for RJmt by seeking her in some moments of our tradition that include a promise of redemption. These moments respond to an aspect of our lived experience such as shame, loss or confusion. The micro, our lived experience, is reflected in the macro, the ideas repeated in political discourse on a societal level. Through understanding the redemptive possibilities in our life we can come to understand the possibilities on a political level. To help us find a language to do this Jewish tradition offers a mythic moment that encapsulates the moment in our lived experience. In response Jewish practice may suggest a way for us to taste redemption and in so doing offer a reminder that brokenness can make way for healing. I offer three examples below and in the table at the bottom of the page.

1 The Sheva Brachot, said at a wedding, are the closest blessing we have for a blessing for emotional and/or sexual intimacy. The text recalls the mythical moment of the fall from the Garden of Eden which introduced shame into human experience and with it our capacity to judge others and close ourselves off from them. 'Give these companions in love, great happiness, the happiness of your creatures in Eden long ago' the blessing says, acknowledging a moment of redemption from our separateness to others, a moment of living without shame.

2 Shabbat promises to be a taste of redemption: a day when we view the world as perfected and ourselves as having arrived, for a moment, at a resting place on our life journey. Whilst we carry loss, pain and sadness with us in our lives – reflected mythically in the destruction of the temple and exile – Shabbat is a moment of redemption with the temple rebuilt in time rather than in space, our exile put on hold as we find a refuge and with it the promise that we can learn to be whole even with the loss that we endured.

3 Torah study, offers ‘rejoicing and delight’ as we study Torah and encounter wisdom that can help us voice our confusion and uncertainty. We are limited in our understanding; the truth of all is elusive to us. Mythically this is reflected in the shattering of the tablets. We are left with a Torah which is itself incomplete and imperfect. Yet Torah study – when we bring the time-specific wisdom from our own life to the eternal text of Torah – offers us understandings and insights that we did not know were possible, a taste for a fleeting moment of the redemptive possibility of understanding, comprehension when meaning is restored to our lives.

By affirming the spark of redemption within our intimate relationships, Shabbat and Torah study, RJmt seeks to re-inject them with holiness, reminding us that their impact has implications far beyond ourselves. The RJmt that I seek, like previous Reform messianisms, is committed to the political action required in this world in order to bring about a just society. It is the retrieval of the ‘sparks of the messianic’ which may lie dormant in Jewish theology, mythology and practice such as those moments suggested that can give us the resilience that we need to recognise the redemptive possibility in our own lives which can inspire us to political action in the world.

We cannot wait passively for RJmt to arrive. We must proactively seek after her within the paradoxical faith that ‘even though she may tarry, I will expect her every day.’

Based on

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*.

Walter Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’.

Peter Ochs, ‘The Torah’s Wounded Authority’.

Contemplation

Judaism’s various approaches to Messianic ideas have changed and developed through the ages. They have also been influenced by events and theologies outside of the Jewish community.

At the heart of both these articles is an assumption that messianic redemption in our context is something that requires human activity – we do not wait for a Messiah, but build a messianic age through our ethical and ritual lives.

Building a messianic era is thus something we can all usefully contribute to, even though it may feel like a drop in the ocean. What will be your contribution?