

Shabbat Vayiggash 5774

What Do Jews Believe About the Messiah?

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It is said of the prophet Elijah, Eliyahu Hanavi, that he did not die but was rather swept up into heaven by a fiery chariot. And according to our tradition, ever since then he has been on the border, coming down periodically to look in on us. One of his jobs will be to announce the imminent coming of the *Mashiach* -- the Messiah.

This is the song we sing, every Saturday night when we light the *havdalah* candle to end Shabbat and start a new week. Or at the Pesach Seder, after we eat, when we open the door for Eliyahu:

Eliyahu Hanavi.....Bim'hera v'yameinu yavo alylanu, im mashiach ben David. Eliyahu the prophet, may he come to us quickly, in our days, with the Messiah descended from King David.

What does that mean?

In later biblical times, Jews originated the idea of a redeemer who would end the oppression and exile of the Jewish people, and reestablish a kingdom based on justice and faithfulness to God. As the prophets originally saw it, this redeemer would be a descendent of King David, whose family dynasty ruled Jerusalem for more than 400 years. The word "*mashiach*" means anointed, because when David was selected by God to be king, he was anointed by the prophet Samuel.

Over time, the idea of a Messiah became broadened. This figure would not just be about the Jews and our land, but would usher in a transformation of the entire world.

In Jewish history, there have been basically two kinds of messianism, two ways of interpreting who the Messiah is and what this person would represent.

One way is apocalyptic. Some of the later prophets described a terrible conflict, a war among the nations, waged by this King Messiah or by God. At the end, those who were ready to serve God would come to Jerusalem, to worship at the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple. Everyone else would be destroyed, or perhaps just disappear. After the apocalypse would come a kind of new world on earth. People would be changed; our hearts wouldn't work the same way they do now, and everything about the order of the world would change.

The apocalypse stems from the idea that the world we have is just too far from the

world that God wants. There is just no way from here to there. We can't do it without a gift from God.

Whenever things have been turbulent in the Jewish world, some Jews interpret this as a sign of the end times, and look for a Messiah figure. It was this way in the time of Jesus, and also in the centuries after the Jews were thrown out of Spain in 1492. In our time, after the Holocaust, there are Jews who see the wars of Israel this way, as a sign that the Messiah is coming.

For me today, I find nothing compelling in this vision of apocalypse. It rejects this world, and all of us who are in it. It gives me no task, no way of being close to God or even just feeling close to God. The Messiah who is imagined in this way is not a teacher and a leader, but a warrior and a king.

If this is what God has in mind, then I prefer not to think about it. And it won't matter -- if I'm right or wrong, chances are I'm one of those who will be swept away.

There is, however, another Jewish way of thinking about the Messiah. It's taught in the Talmud by a mystic named Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who claimed authority from none other than Eliyahu himself, whom he apparently spoke to regularly.

One day, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was speaking with Eliyahu, and asked: "When is the Messiah coming?" "Why don't you go and ask him?" replied Eliyahu. And Yehoshua was transported from Israel to the gates of Rome. He found a group of lepers, tending to their wounds. Among them was one person, who unlike the others, changed the bandages he was wearing bit by bit rather than taking them all off at once. This was the *Mashiach*.

Rabbi Yehoshua said, "*Shalom Aleicha*, my master and teacher." The Messiah looked up and said, "*Shalom Aleicha*, son of Levi." "When are you coming?" "Today," said the *Mashiach*.

When Rabbi Yehoshua returned home, he said to Eliyahu: "The *Mashiach* lied to me. He said that was coming today, and yet he has not." And Eliyahu explained, "No -- you did not let him finish. For he was reminding you of a verse from the Psalms: 'Today -- if you will listen to God's voice.'"

According to Eliyahu Hanavi, the Messiah can come once people have begun to listen to God's voice. He changes his bandages gradually, so that at a moment's notice he can come. In the meantime, he lives in exile, in poverty, and in pain.

But, the Talmud suggests: when the Messiah comes, the world will already have

changed. It will already be redeemed. We will have found a way to change our hearts, and our ways. It will be a process in this world, and one that involves the whole world. And so the Messiah is not the product of miracles or terrible wars, but only of an intensification of the things we do for *tikkun olam*. The Messiah is not the redeemer, but the capstone of redemption.

And so the focus is not on a person -- the Messiah - but the messianic hopes and the vision of the messianic era.

In the historic days of kings, we could point to a powerful individual and say: This one will reshape the world. Today, we know that in our world, this side of the messianic age, it's never a single person. Even Nelson Mandela, great force that he was, was not alone, and he was not flawless. The words *Mashiach ben David* -- the Messiah, descended from David -- is for me poetry, not a prediction. That's how it is for most Jewish thinkers. Look in any of the books of Jewish theology, other than what you find on settlements in the West Bank or in Chabad-Lubavitch, which is another story. You'll find nothing at all about the individual redeemer from David.

There is a danger here, of mistaking large social movements and forces for signs of the Messiah. Socialism spread with messianic fervor, and millions were killed. On their own, no movement for justice and equality can be the messianic movement -- but they can give us glimpses of the messianic age and move us closer to it. There is no question that messianic dreams are not just individual -- personal insight, or personal acts of tzedakah. When you talk messianic, you talk about the whole world.

So what do I do when I see so many words in our Siddur, in our prayerbook, about the redeemer and the *Mashiach*? As I said, I read them as poetry, not law. They are the concrete image of the world I need to help create, and of the personal change I and we need to undertake to make that happen. They remind me that there is not just good and bad on the scale of my life, but on the scale of the world, and that I and we have something to do with that.

And I focus not so much on the *Mashiach* idea, but on Eliyahu, the image of the one designated by God to look at earth from heaven's point of view, to check here and report back.

When on Passover we relive the Exodus, our great moment of transformation and redemption -- we summon Eliyahu, to say: We know that our world can be transformed, that humans do not have to make other humans suffer, or tolerate injustice. We know it for real, because it happened to *me*, to us when we left Egypt.

When the new week begins with dark sky on Saturday night, we summon Eliyahu, to say: This could be the week when we all finally do our *teshuvah*, our self-repair, and stop obstructing the world that God wants to exist on this earth.

When a new baby arrives, we set up a chair for Eliyahu, and say: Come see this child. Perhaps this one will grow up and be the catalyst we have needed, the one who will teach and inspire us to bring about a world of peace and plenty.

Harachaman, hu z'yakenu limot Hamashiach -- Compassion God, may Your spirit move through us and help us build a world that is worthy of being called messianic.