

Is This the Final Geula?

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Walking the streets of Israel, it is almost impossible to ignore the extent to which today's wondrous reality conforms to the predictions of the Biblical prophets and the Talmudic rabbis. 150 years ago, the Land of Israel was a desolate wasteland (as it had been for untold centuries), and the Jewish people were scattered around the world and powerless. Today, by contrast, millions of Jews live in our national homeland, which is a sovereign independent state with a powerful army, impressive agriculture and industry, and a thriving economy. Whether one sits in the study hall of a Yeshiva in Jerusalem, rides a tractor through fields in the Jezreel Valley or vineyards in the Golan Heights, or strolls past gleaming skyscrapers in Tel Aviv's financial district, the words of the prophets and the rabbis come alive.

In the Torah itself, Avraham Avinu was assured, "I have given the land of your inhabitation – all of the land of Canaan – to you and your descendants after you as an eternal estate"¹. Later in the Torah, we are promised, "If your banished ones reach the far ends of the heavens, from there shall Hashem gather you and from there shall He take you. And Hashem your God will bring you to the land your forefathers inherited, and you shall inherit it."² The prophet Zecharia foresaw a simple life of normalcy in rebuilt Zion: "It shall yet happen that old men and women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each one holding his cane because of old age, and the streets shall be filled with children playing in the streets."³ The rabbis of the Talmud⁴ told us that there is "no greater indication of the End of Days" than the fulfillment of the verse⁵ "And you O mountains of Israel, give forth your branches and produce your fruit for [the benefit of] My people Israel – who are coming soon." All of these verses, which just a few generations ago seemed like impossible dreams, are today simple realities that we sometimes take for granted.

For this reason, many Religious Zionists⁶ view the State of Israel as the beginning (and perhaps more than that) of the messianic redemption that we have been awaiting for all of history. In fact, as a movement that sought to bring about the ingathering of Jewish exiles and their return

¹ Bereishit 17:8

² Devarim 30:4-5

³ Zecharia 8:4

⁴ Sanhedrin 98a

⁵ Yechezkel 36:8

⁶ As a political movement, Zionism began in 1897. However, the roots of Zionist ideology began to form in Europe at least several decades earlier, during a period sometimes known as "proto-Zionism". Already from this early stage, religious leaders were divided in their attitudes towards the emerging movement. Some were opposed, and some in favor (with the majority seemingly undecided). Thus "religious Zionism" is as old as Zionism itself. And religious Zionism has never been simply "Zionism by people who happen to be religious" – it has always been a separate movement which shared similar goals to secular Zionism, but always maintained its own unique terms of reference and ideology.

to the ancient homeland of *Eretz Yisrael*, even secular Zionism could not ignore the profound parallel between their plans to create a Jewish State in Palestine and the biblical prophecies of redemption. Herzl himself – an avowed secularist and agnostic – made explicit reference to this in a number of places.⁷ Certainly, Torah scholars who formulated opinions on Zionism could not ignore this connection. They were, however, divided on its significance.⁸

Among those Torah thinkers who can be described as “Religious Zionists”, there have always been two schools of thought⁹ regarding the nature of the Zionist project. One group, which we will refer to as the “messianic” school of thought, sees the State of Israel as the beginning of the process of redemption. According to this view, the initiative to form a Jewish State brought about the partial fulfillment of Biblical prophecies, including those regarding the physical rebirth of the land, the ingathering of exiles and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty. This is viewed as the initial stages of the final redemption. According to this point of view, the Biblical prophecies have already been partially fulfilled, granting our generation a unique status that has been variously referred to as ¹⁰אתחלתא דגאולה or ¹¹ראשית צמיחת גאולתינו. While setbacks and delays are possible, this view maintains that the process is essentially irreversible, and that we can declare with certainty – as a matter of religious faith backed by nothing less than the Torah itself – that the State of Israel will exist forever, and will continue to progress and develop until the final messianic vision of the prophets emerges organically from it. Among other things, adopting this view requires one to take certain positions regarding the nature of the ultimate redemption – including the idea that it can happen slowly and in stages, and that it can come about through a natural historic process, as opposed to a miraculous supernatural one.

Since the earliest days of Religious Zionism, however, there has always been an alternate viewpoint that denies, or at least questions, a messianic role for the State of Israel. The State of Israel is viewed as a positive development insofar as it has saved Jews who were in distress and danger, allowed Jews to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*¹² and has allowed Torah study and religious observance to flourish. However, this analysis is limited to the here and now. All of these things can be cherished and valued without declaring that this has anything to do with the ultimate redemption.

⁷ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, Jacob M. Alkow, trans., New York: American Zionist Emergency Council, 1946, pp. 96, 155-156. See also *Altneuland*, Herzl's 1902 utopian novel depicting his vision of a future Jewish State in Palestine, which draws heavily on Biblical imagery.

⁸ As explained below, some Religious Zionist leaders built their ideologies around these connections, while others distanced themselves from them. Among the opponents of Zionism, there were also different camps. Some (most notably Rav Yoel Teitlebaum, the late Satmar Rav) based their opposition on this very idea, believing that the *Mashiach* must come as a Divine miracle with no human involvement. Others, however, focused on more practical issues, chiefly the secular nature of the State and the non-religious character of secular Zionist leaders.

⁹ Of course, as in any attempt to group great thinkers together, these camps are not monolithic, and there are numerous variations and nuances among the different thinkers. Still, two general lines of thought can be discerned.

¹⁰ Megillah 17b.

¹¹ “The first flowering of our redemption”. This phrase is part of the standard edition of the *Tefillah Lishlom HaMedina*, the prayer for the well-being of the State of Israel, which is attributed to Rav Yitzchak HaLevi Herzog.

¹² The *mitzvah* to live in the Land of Israel. See Ramban, *Additions to Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 4*. See also Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim* 5:9-12.

Adherents to this view are not necessarily less “Zionistic” than the messianic Zionists. They support efforts to create and sustain the State of Israel, and view its successes as miraculous Divine gifts worthy of rejoicing and gratitude. They may issue strong calls for Aliya, place a priority on strengthening the State and its religious character, can celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut (and even recite Hallel), and speak passionately of the miraculous gifts that Hashem bestowed on us and our responsibility to express gratitude.

However, according to this school of thought, we cannot ascribe messianic significance to these events. Those who hold this view may symbolically express this by either omitting or altering¹³ the phrase “ראשית צמיחת גאולתינו” in the prayer for the State of Israel, and they will avoid making any statements (and certainly any decisions) that express certainty about how the future will unfold. They are generally more cautious and tentative in their worldview.

In the coming pages, we’ll briefly trace the existence of these two schools by referencing a few of the many notable leading figures in each camp, from the middle of the 19th century until today. We’ll also discuss how historical events have had their own impact on the debate, with different viewpoints achieving dominance in different time periods in response to the events of the time. Finally, we’ll try to at least tentatively suggest a new, “middle of the road” approach that is both rooted in traditional sources and perhaps ideally suited to the situation we find ourselves in today.

The Messianic School of Religious Zionism

In the year 1862, Rav Zvi Hirsch Kalischer¹⁴ published a small book with the title *Drishat Zion*. In this book and in further writings and letters over the coming years¹⁵, he developed the idea that the long-awaited *geula* of the Jewish people would not happen spontaneously and miraculously; rather, it would require a this-worldly effort to raise funds, organize immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*,¹⁶ rebuild the land¹⁷ and even build a *mizbeach* on the Temple Mount and re-institute the offering of *korbanot*.¹⁸ While he knew his positions were unconventional, he expressed hope that other Torah scholars would come to agree with him,¹⁹ and corresponded with a number of them on the topic. He was also an ardent supporter of the immigration group *Hovevei Zion*, putting his theoretical ideas into practical action.

¹³ Some people omit the phrase, praying for the well-being of the State but not connecting it with the redemption in any way. Others modify it to say something like גאולתינו ראשית צמיחת גאולתינו, turning the phrase into a prayerful wish, as opposed to a descriptive declaration.

¹⁴ 1795-1874. Born in Prussia, he studied under the great Rabbi Akiva Eiger. For more than 40 years he served as the rabbi of Thorn. Kibbutz Tirat Zvi, located in the Bet Shean valley, is named in his memory.

¹⁵ Both the original book and the later writings have been reprinted multiple times over the past century. A recent edition, in modern typeface and with additional notes, references and photos, was published by Mosad HaRav Kook in 2002. References in footnotes in this article refer to that edition.

¹⁶ *Drishat Zion*, pp. 37-41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

For Rav Kalischer and some others of his generation²⁰, it was clear that the redemption of the Jewish people required a program of action similar to that which eventually became known as Zionism. In his generation, of course, many of these ideas remained primarily theoretical.

Several decades later, though, waves of immigration had brought tens of thousands of Jews to the land, agricultural and urban settlements had been founded and political Zionism was a reality. Talk of a future Jewish State was in the air. In this environment, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook wrote extensively about the messianic nature of what was happening.²¹ Rav Kook spoke in mystical terms of the rebirth of Am Yisrael that he perceived in his generation. For many centuries, he taught, the Jewish people had been in exile, and as such could be compared to a soul without a body. For this reason, Jews in exile had focused mainly on the spiritual aspects of Torah – study and prayer. As important as these are, Rav Kook said, they represent only part of the totality of service of God that is demanded of us. In returning to our land and restoring our national existence and political sovereignty, the “body” of the Jewish People was being revived. Rav Kook saw great significance in all aspects of the emerging country – the agricultural revival, the development of cities, of a political system and army, and all other aspects of national existence. To him, these were all part of the approaching redemption of Am Yisrael.

Rav Kook passed away in 1935 and thus was unable to relate to the actual State of Israel. But his son, Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook, lived through the establishment of the State in 1948 and the miracles of the Six Day War in 1967. He further developed his father’s ideas and formulated a vision that equated the modern State with the messianic redemption in very clear and precise terms.

According to Rav Zvi Yehuda, it is absolutely clear that the redemption will take place in a gradual fashion, and that the first step in this process is the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty, which was achieved in 1948.²² He said that this is not a matter of interpretation, a hope or a wish – it is as clear as day and an absolute certainty.²³ Although at the end of the process we will be ruled by the *Melech HaMashiach* who will be a descendent of King David, the present democratic government of Israel represents the beginning of his reign.²⁴

According to Rav Zvi Yehuda, the *Ymot haMashiach* have already begun. Although the process is not complete, it is well underway²⁵ and anyone who doubts this demonstrates a lack of faith.²⁶ As a result of this, he ruled that all of the wars fought by the IDF have the halachic status of *milchemet mitzvah*.²⁷ When the IDF captures territory, this is a fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of

²⁰ Such as Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai of Sarajevo, who had written similar ideas (though with a Kabbalistic orientation, and without including the idea of reinstating korbanot) as early as 1834. Other rabbis who expressed similar ideas included Rav Eliyahu Gutmacher and Rav Shmuel Mohilever.

²¹ This theme is found in many of Rav Kook’s extensive writings. For example, see the book *Orot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1949), especially the first two sections.

²² *Sichot HaRav Zvi Yehuda: Eretz Yisrael*, edited by Rav Shlomo Aviner, Yeshivat Ateret Kohanim, 2005, p. 163.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

²⁵ *Sichot Harav Zvi Yehuda: Moadim II*, p. 130 and 138 and many other places.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁷ An obligatory war. Assigning our reality to this halachic category carries a number of ramifications, including making universal military service a halachic obligation.

Kibbush Eretz Yisrael (conquering the land), and thus it is forbidden to subsequently relinquish this land, even in the context of a peace treaty.

As we will explain later on, in the decades following the Six Day War, these views achieved dominance in Religious Zionist circles, at least in Israel. Many – indeed most – of the rabbinic leadership of Religious Zionism²⁸ spoke in these terms, leading many people to think that being a Religious Zionist requires accepting all of the above concepts. There has, however, always been another point of view.

Non-messianic Religious Zionism

Rabbi Yitzchak Yaacov Reines²⁹ was a member of the pre-Zionist *Hovevei Zion* movement, and one of the first Rabbinic supporters of Herzl's Zionist movement. While most of the rabbinic leadership of the time was opposed to the Zionist movement (largely because of its secular character), Rav Reines founded the Mizrachi party – the first institutional body of Religious Zionism.

There were a number of reasons why Rav Reines supported Zionism. Firstly, he identified with Herzl's idea that Jewish nationalism and an eventual Jewish state could protect Jews against anti-semitism.³⁰ Beyond this, he believed that a Jewish state could provide a “spiritual center”³¹ for the Jewish people, where Torah learning and *mitzvah* observance could thrive. He felt that the Zionist movement would first and foremost be a fulfillment of the mitzvah of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*³², and would also encourage the Jewish people and help revive their faith³³, restore their pride and enthusiasm,³⁴ would protect them from assimilation and constitute an essential element of the process of *teshuva*.³⁵ However, he was careful to never categorize these positive developments as the final redemption, or even its beginning. He viewed all of this as part of the long historical development from *churban* to *geula*, but not as the redemption itself.³⁶

Several decades later, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik articulated very similar views. The Rav was a Zionist, a member of Mizrachi and honorary president of the Religious Zionists of America. He spoke many times about his love for the Land of Israel and support for the State, and addressed it in a number of places in his writings. He marveled at the intense opposition that Israel faces from the nations of the world, and reasoned that this can only mean that the State is endowed with intense holiness and spiritual significance.³⁷

²⁸ Rav Shlomo Goren and Rav Avraham Shapiro are two of many notable examples.

²⁹ 1839-1915

³⁰ Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Reines, *Or Chadash Al Zion* (written in 1901), New York, 1946, pp. 7-8, 21.

³¹ The name “Mizrachi” is an acronym for *Merkaz Ruchani*, “spiritual center”.

³² *Or Chadash Al Zion*, pp. 33-60.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 202-204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁶ See Aviezer Ravitsky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 33.

³⁷ Rav Hershel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav*, Jerusalem: Reishit Yerushalayim Press, 1994, p. 86.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of his reasons for this support can be seen in the well-known passage in his landmark essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*,³⁸ in which he articulated the “six knocks”, the six great miracles that he saw in the establishment of the State of Israel: 1) the almost supernatural political development in which a majority of nations of the world voted to support Jewish independence, 2) the miraculous military victory of the out-numbered, poorly trained and poorly equipped Jewish army against their numerous Arab enemies, 3) the historic repudiation of Christian theology regarding the rejection of the Jews, 4) the re-awakening of Jewish spirits as an antidote to assimilation after the Holocaust, 5) the ability of Jews to defend themselves and avenge their martyrs, and 6) our newfound ability to save Jews in distress and protect them from danger.

Noticeably absent from this list is anything having to do with the coming of the Mashiach. Whereas for Rav Kook, the metaphysical entities of *Klal Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael* – and thus by extension of *Medinat Yisrael* – occupy central roles, the Rav placed these values into halachic contexts that bring them into line with many other halachic concepts, values and principles.³⁹ For Rav Zvi Yehuda and others of his school of thought, the State of Israel has *intrinsic* significance and holiness, but for the Rav its significance lies in its ability to actualize and facilitate the *mitzvah* of settling the land.⁴⁰

In a number of cases, the Rav was explicit about his opposition to attributing a messianic character to the State. This cannot be the ultimate redemption, he said, since the Jewish people have not yet achieved real independence and sovereignty – as demonstrated, for example, by the fact that the Secretary of State of the United States can summon the Israeli Prime Minister to Washington at will. “Under such circumstances,” the Rav once explained, “there is no real independence, no real sovereignty. [Only] with the arrival of the Mashiach, the Jewish people will reappear [on the stage of history].”⁴¹ In a 1957 letter, the Rav succinctly summarized his approach to Zionism as a “third halachic approach” in between that of the non-Zionist haredim “whose eyes are shut and reject [the significance of the State]” and the messianic Zionist “dreamers” who “adopt a completely positive stance to the point where they identify the State with the [fulfillment] of the highest goal of our historical and meta-historical destiny.” His own approach “would be positively inclined toward the State and would express gratitude for its establishment ...but would not attach excessive value to the point of its glorification and deification”.⁴²

The difference between the Rav’s approach and that of Rav Zvi Yehuda is not merely theoretical. There are ramifications in the halachic and public policy spheres, such as regarding the question

³⁸ Based on a speech given at Yeshiva University on Yom HaAtzmaut 1957, it was originally published as a pamphlet in 1977 by the Israeli Ministry of Education, and later reprinted in *Ish HaEmunah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1986).

³⁹ Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, “Al Yachso shel ha-Grid Soloveitchik za”l LaZionut”, *Alon Shvut Bogrim* Vol. 17 (2003), pp. 164 and 168.

⁴⁰ *Nefesh HaRav*, pp. 86-87.

⁴¹ August 28, 1974 address in Boston, recorded in Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Volume 2, Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1999, p. 132.

⁴² Letter to Mr. Moshe Meisels, editor of the Hebrew weekly *Ha-Do'ar*. Published in Nethaniel Helfgot, ed., *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2005, pp. 163-166. I am indebted to my friend and neighbor Rabbi Reuven Zeigler for directing me to this source.

of relinquishing land in the context of a peace treaty. As noted above, Rav Zvi Yehuda ruled that this would be forbidden under any circumstances, since this would represent a repudiation of the historic mission of *kibbush HaAretz* and a reversal of the messianic process. For the Rav, however, if the continued existence of the State would require relinquishing land, this would be both permitted and required.⁴³

Beyond this, there are ramifications also on the national, communal and personal levels, regarding the relative weight one assigns to supporting and developing Medinat Yisrael and encouraging Aliya, as opposed to other Torah values. If this is, as Rav Zvi Yehuda held, the advanced stages of the coming of the Mashiach, then it is more important than almost anything else. Conversely, if one ascribes to Rav Soloveitchik's view, then Medinat Yisrael is a very important Torah value – but it is not necessarily more significant than other Torah values. Indeed, the Rav has been invoked (rightly or wrongly) in support of the idea that American Jews – at least those involved in the community's leadership – should support Israel from afar, but not necessarily make Aliya.⁴⁴

History's Pendulum

Until 1967, the majority of the Religious Zionist rabbinic leadership was careful not to speak in definitively messianic terms about the State of Israel, reflecting the caution inherent in the classic approach of Mizrachi and Rav Soloveitchik. However, following the Six Day War, Rav Zvi Yehuda's messianism became much more popular, and as noted above, ultimately achieved dominance. There can be little question about the role of historical events in this ideological shift. The miraculous military victory and subsequent resettling of our ancient homelands in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria (a movement which was initially led by Rav Zvi Yehuda's students) seemed to leave little room for doubt that the process of the final redemption was reaching an advanced stage.

This view occupied center stage for at least two decades, and is still quite dominant in the Religious Zionist community here in Israel. However, over the past twenty years the pendulum has begun to swing back in the opposite direction, largely due to additional historical developments. First in the 1978 Camp David agreement and subsequently in the Oslo Agreements of the 1990s, land that was captured in the miraculous wars was in fact relinquished to the Arab countries and the Palestinian Authority. These facts led many to question whether Rav Zvi Yehuda's assessments of the messianic character of the State were in fact correct.

More recently, the traumatic 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and consequent destruction of Gush Katif and expulsion of its residents from their homes and towns has caused a genuine ideological crisis within the community. The crisis is particularly acute because these events were brought about not as a result of a military defeat, but rather by decision of the Israeli

⁴³*Nefesh HaRav*, p. 98. While the question of relinquishing land is not by necessity linked to the question of the messianic nature of the State, it is certainly related to it and influenced by it.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Rabbi Reuven Spolter, "In Search Of Leaders", *Jewish Action* Volume 64, No. 3 (Spring 2004 – accessible online at <http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/S764/S764spr/INSEARCH.PDF>), and this author's response in the "Counterpoint" section of the Fall 2005 issue (<http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/S765/S765fall/COUNTERP.PDF>). See also *Nefesh HaRav*, pp. 98-99.

government as implemented by the IDF. Thus, the very entities which Rav Zvi Yehuda saw as the embodiment of the redemption became the vehicles for the apparent reversal of some of the steps towards this redemption.

As a result of this trauma, some elements in the Religious Zionist community have ceased to identify with classic Zionism and have loosened their identification with the State and the government. Other elements within the community – alarmed by these developments – have called for a return to the classic approach of Mizrachi, which emphasized the importance of building the State for all that it accomplishes in the present, and downplays or removes connection with the future redemption.⁴⁵ It seems that time and history have demonstrated both the limitations and inherent dangers of excessive messianism. This is driving the return to a more cautious approach that focuses on the here and now, and leaves the process of history largely in God's hands.

At the same time, I believe we must be careful not to swing too far in the opposite direction. As I write these words in my home town of Alon Shevut in Gush Etzion – glancing out the window at beautiful mountain vistas dotted by Jewish towns and farms in the very hills where the *Avot* walked and the *Maccabim* fought, with the Jerusalem skyline visible in the valley below – the observations mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this essay still seem very significant. Looking around my *shul* as I sometimes do, realizing that I have the privilege to pray in this unique location with a congregation of Jews who have gathered together and come back home from tens of different countries on every continent on earth, it seems impossible to deny that we are literally living and walking inside a prophetic vision. If we downplay the significance of all of this and view Medinat Yisrael as nothing more than an important tool to fulfill *mitzvot*, we run the risk of tragically missing an historic opportunity. Indeed, Rav Soloveitchik himself warned against this very danger in *Kol Dodi Dofek*.⁴⁶ It seems, therefore, that the events of our generation urgently call for a third, nuanced approach that lies somewhere between those of Rav Zvi Yehuda and the Rav.

B'chezkat Mashiach

Perhaps the source for just such an idea can be found in the Rambam. When discussing the *Melech HaMashiach*, the Rambam takes the position that we are not to expect him to perform any supernatural acts or miracles:

Do not think that the messianic king must perform signs and wonders, create new elements in the world, revive the dead or things of that nature. This is not the case, [as can be proven by the fact] that Rabbi Akiva was among the great scholars of the time of the Mishnah, and he was a supporter of the king Ben Koziva (Bar Kochba), and he and all the other

ואל יעלה על דעתך שהמלך המשיח צריך לעשות אותות ומופתים ומחדש דברים בעולם או מחיה מתים וכיוצא בדברים אלו, אין הדבר כך, שהרי רבי עקיבא חכם גדול מחכמי משנה היה, והוא היה נושא כליו של בן כוזיבא המלך, והוא היה אומר עליו שהוא המלך המשיח, ודימה הוא וכל

⁴⁵ For example, see also the recent *Jerusalem Post* opinion piece “The Struggle for the Soul of Religious Zionism”, April 2, 2011, by Rabbi Yosef Blau (accessible online at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=214872>).

⁴⁶ *Ish HaEmunah*, pp. 74-77, 83-86.

scholars of his generation saw him as the messianic king – until he was killed due to sins. [Only] when he was killed did they determine that he was not [the Mashiach], but they never asked him for signs or wonders.

Hilchot Melachim 11:3

חכמי דורו שהוא המלך המשיח, עד שנהרג בעונות, כיון שנהרג נודע להם שאינו, ולא שאלו ממנו חכמים לא אות ולא מופת,
רמב"ם הלכות מלכים יא:ג

Since Rabbi Akiva considered Bar Kochba to be the Mashiach even though he had not done any miracles, the Rambam deduces that an ability to perform miracles is not an essential quality for the Mashiach.⁴⁷ This proof is fascinating, since, as the Rambam notes, Rabbi Akiva himself eventually realized that this ruling had been incorrect. How, then, can the Rambam quote this as the source for a halacha?

The answer is provided in the next paragraph, where the Rambam discusses the criteria for evaluating a potential Mashiach:

*If a king shall arise from the House of David, who is learned in Torah and observant of mitzvot like his ancestor David – following both the written and the oral Torah – and he compels all of Israel to follow it and strengthens its observance, and he fights wars on behalf of God, then this [king] is to be **presumed** to be the Mashiach. If he is successful in his endeavors, defeats all of the nations surrounding him, builds the Bet HaMikdash in its correct location and gathers the remotely dispersed exiles, then he is **definitely** the Mashiach. But if he does not succeed in all of that or is killed, it is clear that he is not the one to whom the Torah's promises referred, but rather he is among all the other good and proper kings from the house of David who died.*

Hilchot Melachim 11:4⁴⁸

ואם יעמוד מלך מבית דוד הוגה בתורה ועוסק במצוות כדוד אביו, כפי תורה שבכתב ושבעל פה, ויכוף כל ישראל לילך בה ולחזק בדקה, וילחם מלחמות ה', הרי זה בחזקת שהוא משיח, אם עשה והצליח ונצח כל האומות שסביביו ובנה מקדש במקומו וקבץ נדחי ישראל הרי זה משיח בודאי. ואם לא הצליח עד כה או נהרג בידוע שאינו זה שהבטיחה עליו תורה והרי הוא ככל מלכי בית דוד השלמים הכשרים שמתו.
רמב"ם הלכות מלכים יא:ד

The term “*b’chezkat Mashiach*” – “presumed to be the Mashiach” – is a halachic concept. In Jewish law, there are certain assumptions that one is allowed – and in fact obligated – to make, even though one does not know for certain that they are true. For example, a *mikveh* that was measured and determined to contain a sufficient quantity of water is considered kosher and is assumed to contain the correct amount of water until proven otherwise, unless there is reason to be concerned that some of the water has escaped. One may use the *mikveh* and rely on this assumption, even though we know that it is possible that it no longer has enough water to be kosher.⁴⁹ The *chazaka* – the halachic assumption – remains valid unless proven otherwise.

It is clear from context that the Rambam’s ruling regarding *b’chezkat Mashiach* is based on Rabbi Akiva’s decision regarding Bar Kochba. In the end, it turned out that Rabbi Akiva’s ruling was

⁴⁷ Later on, in 12:1-2, he implies that there will be no miracles at all in the *Ymot HaMashiach*.

⁴⁸ Parts of this passage are missing from the standard editions of the Rambam due to Christian censorship, but can be seen in several contemporary editions based on earlier manuscripts.

⁴⁹ *Shulchan Aruch*, YD 201:62-65.

not correct, but he still acted according to the halacha by making this assumption⁵⁰. Therefore, if such a situation were to arise again in the future, we are to act exactly as Rabbi Akiva did and make the same assumption, even though we realize that it may once again turn out to be incorrect!

If the king in question succeeds in his mission, then we will know with certainty that he is, in fact, the Mashiach. But if he ultimately fails as Bar Kochba did, then we will know retroactively that he was not the Mashiach. Nevertheless, once he has met the requirements for being considered the presumptive Mashiach, we are obligated to follow him, support him and assume that he is the Mashiach, even as we realize that this assumption may later turn out to be false.

Today's reality does not directly fit into the Rambam's category of *b'chezkat Mashiach* as we do not have a king who meets the criteria. However, perhaps this category can provide a model for a contemporary, revised Religious Zionist ideology. We can recognize, as Rav Zvi Yehuda did, that we are witnessing the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies, and that this very much appears to be the final redemption. In fact, we will assume that it is and act accordingly. At the same time, we can also maintain the Rav's caution and recognize that we don't absolutely know this to be the case. This possibility will remain in our minds even as we contemplate events through the prism of messianic redemption.

We will view our generation as something that we might call *בחזקת אתחלתא דגאולה*, *presumed to be* the beginning of the *geula*. We will exercise caution and not base any decisions on assumptions regarding the future, since we have not yet reached the stage of certainty regarding future fulfillment of prophecies. But in the meantime, we will continue to view this as the redemption, express boundless gratitude to Hashem for bringing this development in our generation, and do everything within our power to continue to advance the process until we reach the point when all of the Rambam's conditions are fulfilled. May it happen speedily in our days.

⁵⁰ Some commentators suggest that Rabbi Akiva was not completely wrong in his assumption and that Bar Kochba had the potential to be the Mashiach or even was some sort of a precursor of the Mashiach.