

Longing for Redemption and the Purpose of the Messianic Era

Tisha b-Av is a day in which we contemplate not just destruction but also about redemption. Even as we mourn, we look forward to a better future. One reflection of this theme is the tradition that Mashiach will be born on Tisha b-Av.¹

But what exactly are we longing for? In a world of persecution, of blood libels and pogroms, perhaps this was obvious. Of course, we have not been cured of the scourge of persecution. Nor will we rid ourselves of this threat until the redemption. Current events are making this reality more and more obvious. Nevertheless, in our day when thankfully most of us are relatively comfortable and secure many people wonder why we need Mashiach. Some are even uncomfortable about the notion, especially if it involves the restoration of the sacrificial rite. In the words of one of my students — will the Superbowl be canceled if Mashiach comes?

Now is not the occasion to address this query specifically by describing (as best we can) what exactly will change in the messianic era. Instead, I wish to consider the purpose of Mashiach and the nature of a remarkable obligation — to long for redemption.

First, we must prove that there is such an obligation. Rambam includes



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belief in Mashiach among the thirteen principles of faith:

והיסוד השנים עשר ימות המשיח, והוא להאמין ולאמת שיבא ואין לומר שנתאחר אם יתמהמה חכה לו... ולהאמין בו מן הגדולה והאהבה ולהתפלל לבואו בהתאם למה שנאמר בו על ידי כל נביא, ממשה ועד מלאכי. ומי שנסתפק בו או זלזל בענינו הרי זה מכחיש את התורה שהבטיחה בו בפירוש בפרשת בלעם ואתם נצבים...

The twelfth principle is the era of Mashiach, namely, to believe and affirm that he will come and that one should be waiting for him even though he delays in coming... and to believe that he will be great and beloved, and to pray for his arrival in accordance with what was stated about him by all of the prophets from Moshe to Malachi. And anyone who is unsure about this or denigrates it contradicts the Torah that explicitly promised [concerning] him...

While the other twelve principles of faith demand only belief, Rambam is explicit that simply believing in the coming of Mashiach is insufficient. One must long for his coming as well. Likewise, in *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam stresses that one who believes in Mashiach but fails to pine for his coming is considered a heretic:

וכל מי שאינו מאמין בו, או מי שאינו מחכה לביאתו, לא בשאר נביאים בלבד הוא כופר, אלא בתורה ובמשה רבינו, שהרי התורה העידה עליו שנאמר ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך ורחמך ושב וקבצך וגו' אם יהיה נדחק בקצה השמים וגו' והביאך ה'... הלכות מלכים יא:

Whoever does not believe in him, or does not await his coming, denies not only [the statements of] the other prophets, but also [those of] the Torah and of Moshe, our teacher, for the Torah attests to his coming, stating: "And Hashem, your God, will bring back your captivity and have compassion upon you. He will return and gather you [from among all the nations].... Even if your dispersed ones are in the furthest reaches of the heavens, [from there will God gather you in].... God will bring you [to the land]..." (Devarim 30:3-5).

Hilchot Mamrim 11:1

That the lack of yearning constitutes heresy indicates the level to which we are required to believe the thirteen principles: we must be committed to them as values. Belief, in and of itself, is insufficient.

Although yearning for Mashiach is necessary, it is not always easy. Indeed,

the Talmud records that every Jew is asked six (difficult) questions after leaving this world, one of which is “Did you long for redemption?”² For the most part, however, this longing is natural and has characterized the Jewish people in exile, as we state in the daily prayers, “*ki leyeshuat’cha kivinu kol hayom* — for your redemption we have hoped all day long.”³

Nevertheless, for many in our day and age, the imperative to long for redemption is difficult to understand and implement. People wonder why we must long for Mashiach. In a sense, this question reveals a lack of appreciation of who we are and how we got here. Throughout the exile, longing for redemption gave the persecuted Jews the hope necessary to survive and flourish.

Longing for redemption, however, goes much further than freedom from persecution. To more fully appreciate what we are longing for,

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let us consider two rectifications that will be achieved in the messianic era: closeness to God and sanctification of His name.

Mashiach: Our Spiritual Renaissance and Restoration of Nationhood

More than anything else, Mashiach will be a time to reach the spiritual goals unattainable in our current situation.

לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח,
לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם, ולא כדי
שירדו בעכו"ם, ולא כדי שינשאו אותם
העמים, ולא כדי לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח,
אלא כדי שיהיו פנויים בתורה וחכמתה, ולא
יהיה להם נוגש ומבטל, כדי שיזכו לחיי
העולם הבא, כמו שביארנו בהלכות תשובה.
הלכות מלכים יב:

The sages and prophets did not yearn for the messianic era in order that [the Jewish people] rule over the entire world, nor in order that they have dominion over the gentiles nor that they be exalted by them, nor in order that they eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, their aspiration was that [the Jewish people] be free [to involve themselves] in Torah and its wisdom without anyone to oppress or disturb them, and thus they will be found worthy of life in the world to come, as we explained in Hilchot Teshuva.

Hilchot Melachim 12:4

The prophet Yechezkeil (chapter 37) reveals the degree to which this is so. As we noted in “Images of our exile and the purpose of Galut” (*Torah To Go*, Tisha B’Av 2014), the prophet compares the Jewish people in exile to dry bones. Essentially, according to Ramban, we have died in exile. The messianic redemption is depicted by resurrection to indicate that with the coming of Mashiach, we will be

brought back to life. [The fact that we do not feel dead reflects a lack of awareness of our inherent spiritual potential.]

Redemption will be a time of intense revelation of truth: “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea” (*Chabakuk* 2:14). The word of God will illuminate existence and inspire all of humanity. In the messianic era, the profoundest depths of Torah finally will be revealed, and we will achieve a degree of closeness to God never before achieved; as it states in *Vayikra* 26:11, “And I will place My dwelling in your midst... and I will walk among you and be your God.”

Ultimately, however, as the prophets stress, our spiritual success is much more than individualistic accomplishments. Thus, Mashiach will not just be a time when individuals will reach the spiritual goals unattainable in our current situation; it is about our return to nationhood. While we certainly observe mitzvot and study Torah in exile, we are hardly a nation in the way we once were. This explains the emphasis upon the restoration of the monarchy (*melech ha-Mashiach*) and especially the Davidic dynasty (*et tzemach David avdecha* etc.), because a nation needs a true leader to flourish.

Significantly, national restoration goes well beyond sovereignty, independence, and our ability to know more or do more mitzvot; we yearn for the restoration of our relationship with God. *Shir ha-Shirim*, as understood by Rashi, portrays Israel’s longing to reunite with her lover. In exile, the Jewish people nostalgically recollect their ancient love and mourn the sins that caused their separation. They desire God’s embrace, not a

distant kiss on the hand or shoulder, but, like a bridegroom to his bride, we crave for God to kiss us mouth to mouth.

יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי טוֹבִים דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן:
שיר השירים א:ב

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine.

Shir ha-Shirim 1:2

יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ. זֶה הַשִּׁיר אוֹמֵר מִבְּפִיָּה
בְּגִלוּתָהּ וּבְאַלְמִנוּתָהּ מִי יִתֵּן וַיִּשְׁקֵנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ
שֶׁלֹּא מִנְשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כְּמוֹ מֵאֵז לִפִּי שִׁישׁ
מִקוֹמוֹת שְׁנוּשְׁקִין עַל גַּב הַיָּד וְעַל הַכַּתֵּף אֵךְ
אֲנִי מִתְּאוּרָה וְשׁוֹקֵקֶת לְהִיּוֹתוֹ נוֹהֵג עִמִּי כְּמִנְהַג
הַרְאִשׁוֹן כַּחֲתָן אֵל כְּלָה פֶּה אֵל פֶּה.
רש"י שם

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: She recites this song with her mouth, in her exile and in her widowhood: "If only King Solomon would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth as of old," because in some places they kiss on the back of the hand or on the shoulder, but I desire and wish that he behave toward me as he behaved toward me originally, like a bridegroom with a bride, mouth to mouth.

Rashi, ad loc.

With the coming of Mashiach this reunion will occur.

Mashiach: A Sanctification of God's Name

However, redemption is not just about us — it is about God. Redemption will be a time when good finally will triumph over evil. Yechezkeil frequently declares (see, for example, chapter 20) that the desecration of God's name, inherent in exile, will be rectified.

וְקִבְּצֵתִי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָאָרְצוֹת אֲשֶׁר נִפְצַתֶם בָּם
וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְכֶם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם.
יחזקאל כ:כא

And I shall gather you from the lands in which you were scattered, and I shall be hallowed through you before the eyes of the nations.

Yechezkeil 20:41

(כא) וְאֶחְמַל עַל שְׁם קְדוֹשֵׁי אֲשֶׁר חָלְלוּהוּ בְּיַד
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר בָּאוּ שָׁמָּה: (כב) לָכֵן אֶמַּר
לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם
אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה בְּיַד יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי אִם לְשֵׁם קְדוֹשֵׁי אֲשֶׁר
חָלְלִיתֶם בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר בָּאתֶם שָׁמָּה: (כג) וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי
אֶת שְׁמִי הַגָּדוֹל הַמְּחַלְלֵל בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר חָלְלִיתֶם
בְּתוֹכָם וְנִדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי אֲנִי ה' נְאֻם ה' אֱלֹהֵי
בְּהַקְדִּישִׁי בְכֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם.
יחזקאל לו:כא-כג

But I had pity on My Holy Name, which the house of Israel has profaned among the nations to which they have come. Therefore, say to the house of Israel: "So says Hashem, God: 'Not for your sake do I do this, house of Israel, but for My Holy Name, which you have profaned among the nations to which they have come. And I will sanctify My great Name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord' — is the declaration of the Lord God — 'when I will be sanctified through you before their eyes.'"

Yechezkeil 36:21-23

Zecharya (14:9) goes even farther, stating "On that day," i.e. at the time of redemption, "He will be one and His name will be one." Now, however, He is not fully one. Now a reasonable person might wonder how suffering and injustice are compatible with an all-powerful and beneficent God. But in the messianic era, the problem of evil will be solved once and for all.⁴ Thus, we pray for redemption by declaring "Yehei shemeih raba mevorach le-olam u-lolmei olmaya — May His name become great (i.e. complete or one) and blessed forever and ever."

While these two themes — the loving relationship with God and sanctifying

His name — both can be seen in many sources, some texts stress one over the other. For example, the book of Yeshayahu highlights the former, whereas the book of Yechezkeil focuses on the latter. The redemptive process described in *Parshat Nitzavim* is built upon the former (hence, repentance plays a major role), while the process developed in *Parshat Ha'azinu* depicts the latter. Sometimes, these two themes are merged. For example, we say in *Shmoneh Esrei*, "Umeivi go'el livnei v'neiheim le-ma'an shemo be-ahavah — And He brings a redeemer to their children's children **for His name with love.**" That redemption "for His name" reflects the latter theme, while "with love," which implies that the act of salvation is one of love, points to the former.

Of course, these two themes do not reflect the viewpoints of different authors, but rather reflect two different perspectives that we all must have. Along similar lines, we find traditional sources that highlight two rationales for creation and existence in general: a) so that God may bestow goodness upon us, and b) so that we may recognize His existence. Seemingly, these two reasons for the creation of the world are diametrically opposed: the first is for our sake and the second is for God's sake. In truth, however, both are correct, reflecting two different perspectives.⁵ Likewise, Ramban offers two diametrically opposed understandings of the purpose of mitzvot. In some places, Ramban tells us that the only conceivable purpose of mitzvot is to help and benefit us, *le-tov lach*.⁶ This reflects the first theory above. Elsewhere, however, Ramban indicates that mitzvot are for God.⁷

How can both positions simultaneously be true? The answer is that this second outlook relates to our perspective when doing mitzvot and serving God. Likewise, we should not view the purpose of our existence as an opportunity for pleasure, but rather we should recognize our duty and obligation to sanctify the name of God. Thus, when we consider the reason for the creation of the world, we must contemplate two vantage points. From God's perspective, to the extent that we can understand it, the only possible reason could be an act of beneficence. However, we should not indulge ourselves with such ruminations. From our perspective, the reason why we exist and the reason why God created us is to give honor to Him. Likewise, when considering the redemption, we must consider our perspective as well as God's (to the extent that we can imagine it). The purpose of creation as well as mitzvot is beyond the scope of our current discussion; but that this dichotomy repeats itself frequently highlights the fundamentality of both themes.

Returning to our initial question, why is longing for redemption so fundamental? The answer is that by longing for redemption, we acknowledge these ideals as the focus of our individual and collective existence. To the extent that we fail to long for redemption, we lose focus on those ideals.⁸ This is why mere belief in Mashiach is insufficient. The struggle to long for Mashiach comes from forgetting, to some degree, what life truly is about.

Notes

1 See Jerusalem Talmud, *Berachot* 2:4; *Eichah Rabbah* 1:51.

2 See *Shabbat* 31a:

אמר רבא: בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו: נשאת ונתת באמונה, קבעת עתים לתורה, עסקת בפרייה ורבייה, צפית לישועה, לפללת בחכמה, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר?

Rava said "When a person is brought before the Heavenly tribunal, he is asked: Did you conduct business faithfully? Did you set aside time for Torah? Did you engage in procreation? Did you long for redemption? Did you delve into wisdom? Did you understand one thing from another?"

3 What exactly does this mean? Must we consciously hope for redemption at every moment? Indeed, there are numerous explanations of this line (see, for example, *Sha'arei Teshuva* no. 118), but a discussion of them is beyond the scope of this essay. We should note, however, that R. Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe*, O.C. 5:38:3) in fact rules that one must hope each day that this will be the day that Mashiach arrives. He proves this from *Rosh Hashana* 30a, which states that R. Yochanan ben Zakkai prohibited eating *chadash* (the year's newly harvested wheat) for the entire day of the sixteenth of Nisan since Mashiach might come late in the afternoon prior to the 16th or that very night.

4 R. Mayer Twersky adds that this may be an additional reason why *belief* in redemption is considered a principle of faith. That the world as it presently exists seems imperfect implies a theological problem: how could a perfect God create an imperfect world? We have an answer to this problem, which involves belief that our current state of affairs is but one step in a larger epoch.

5 Moreover, both perspectives are not complete insofar as we are incapable of understanding God's will. Nevertheless, they reflect what we are capable of understanding.

6 See Ramban, *Devarim* 10:12. As proof, he cites the verse in *Iyov* (35:6), "If you sinned, what do you do to Him, and if your

transgressions are many, what do you do to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give Him? Or what does He take from your hand?"

7 See Ramban *Shemot* 26:46:

אבל רבי אברהם אמר כי לא הוצאתי אותם מארץ מצרים רק בעבור כי אשכון בתוכם, וזהו תעבדון את הא-לקים על ההר הזה (לעיל ג:יב). ויפה פירש. ואם כן יש בענין סוד גדול, כי כפי פשט הדבר השכינה בישראל צורך הדיוט ולא צורך גבוה, אבל הוא כענין שאמר הכתוב ישראל אשר בך אתפאר (ישעיה מט:ג), ואמר יהושע ומה תעשה לשמן הגדול (יהושע ז:ט), ופסוקים רבים באו כן, אזה למושב לו (תהלים קלב:יג), פה אשב כי אויתיה (שם יד), וכתוב והארץ אזכור (ויקרא כ:מב).

Ibn Ezra states that God redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt only so that He might dwell among them, and that is the meaning of the verse (Shemot 3:12), "And you shall serve God upon this mountain." This is a good explanation. If so, there is a great secret here, for according to the simple understanding, God's presence amongst the Jewish people is for their sake, not God's. But [the truth is] that it is like the verse, "Israel, I am glorified through you" (Yeshaya 49:3). And Yehoshua said, "And what will You do for Your great name?" (Yehoshua 7:9). And many verses are like this, such as "And He desired to live in it" (Tehillim 132:13) and "I will dwell here for I have so desired" (ibid. 14), and "I will remember the land" (Vaykira 26:42).

8 Matt Lubin suggested that this may be the reason why Rambam includes longing for Mashiach among the thirteen principles. The thirteen principles are not just a list of required beliefs (there are more than thirteen required beliefs). Rather, Rambam writes, they are beliefs and attitudes that allow a person to be a part of the Jewish people and to experience *Olam Ha-ba*. By not longing for Mashiach, a person is removing himself from the eternal hope of the Jewish people. He forfeits his afterlife for being, *poreish min hatzibur* — separating from the community (*Hilchot Teshuva* 3:6, 11), which includes identifying with the Jewish people's national destiny — past, present, and future.



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