

The Message of Gog u-Magog

The haftarot read on Shabbat Chol ha-Moed Pesach and Shabbat Chol ha-Moed Sukkot both address esoteric eschatological themes from the book of Yechezkel. On Pesach, we read about the resurrection of the dry bones and on Sukkot, we study war of *Gog u-Magog*.¹ While this gory and tumultuous story seems to contradict the joyous tone of this holiday (though not necessarily the somber tenor of Kohelet read on the same day), it is consistent with the holiday's emphasis on our relationship with the nations of the world.² In addition, there is a tradition that this war will take place during Sukkot.³ Accordingly, let us briefly explore the message of this haftara.

Chapters 38-39 of Yechezkeil describe a great war in the end of days. This is known as the war of *Gog u-Magog*, on account of the following passage:

א וַיְהִי דְבַר-ה', אֵלַי לֵאמֹר ב בֶּן-אָדָם, שִׁים פְּנֶיךָ אֶל-גּוֹג אֶרֶץ הַמְּגוּג-נְשִׂיא, רֹאשׁ כְּשֶׁף וְתַבְלִי; וְהִנְבֵּא, עָלָיו.

1 And the word of Hashem came to me, saying: 2 "Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tuval, and prophesy against him."
Yechezkeil ch. 38

Yechezkeil prophesies that Gog, the leader of a country called Magog, will lead a campaign to destroy the Jewish people in their land. He will be defeated when God reveals Himself and is sanctified before the entire world. This war also is described in Zecharya 12-13, Yirmiyahu 30, and Daniel 11-12.⁴ While the names Gog and Magog appear only in Yechezkeil,



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many commentaries assume that all of the aforementioned passages refer to the same events, though they present the cataclysmic events from differing perspectives.⁵

Magog's identity is extremely unclear. The only clue from Tanach is Bereishit 10:2, which identifies Magog as a son of Yefet, who was one of Noach's three sons. Malbim writes that we will not know what Magog is until the prophecies concerning it are fulfilled.⁶

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Nevertheless, other commentators offered their own suggestions. For example, Abarbanel suggests that the war of *Gog u-Magog* will involve a great war between Christianity and Islam.⁷

When exactly will this war commence? The Zecharya-vision compares the events to the splitting of the sea, which came after the exodus from Egypt; this may indicate that the war will take place after we already have returned to our land and

restored autonomy. In fact, the story in Yechezkeil explicitly takes place after the Jews have returned to their land, when their peaceful renewal is shattered by a treacherous conflict.

Rambam writes that a simple reading of Tanach suggests that it will take place at the beginning of the messianic era, after the coming of Eliyahu:

יראה מפשוטן של דברי הנביאים, שבתחילת ימות המשיח תהיה מלחמת גוג ומגוג, ושקודם מלחמת גוג ומגוג יעמוד נביא לישר ישראל ולהכין לבם, שנאמר הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליה וגו'.

The simple interpretation of the prophets' words implies that the war of Gog u-Magog will take place at the beginning of the messianic age. Before the war of Gog u-Magog, a prophet will arise to inspire Israel to be upright and prepare their hearts, as Malachi 3:22 states: "Behold, I am sending you Elijah." Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 12:2

Will the individual known as mashiach arrive before or after this war? Chazal seem to provide conflicting answers to this question.

Perhaps the resolution lies in the idea of two messianic figures, Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David. The war will occur after the coming of Mashiach ben Yosef, who will lead the Jewish people in battle and fall tragically, but before the coming of Mashiach ben David.

Alternatively, Chazal may be describing different possible ways in which the redemption will unfold. Chazal frequently identify different models of redemption in the text of Tanach itself.⁸ It would not be surprising, therefore, if they themselves adopted a similar approach in their discussion of the messianic era.

The prophecies relating to the war of Gog u-Magog seem to suggest such a dichotomy. Zecharya describes significant Jewish casualties and, according to the Talmud, the death of Mashiach ben Yosef. However, Yechezkeil suggests that Gog and Magog will be destroyed in such a miraculous manner that the Jewish nation will not even have to fight:⁹

וְנִשְׁפָּטֵתִי אֹתוֹ, בְּדָבָר וּבְדָם; וְגָשָׁם שׁוֹטֵף וְאֶבֶןִי
אֶלְנָבִישׁ אֵשׁ וְנִפְרִית, אֲמַטִּיר עָלָיו וְעַל-אֲנָפָיו,
וְעַל-עַמִּים רַבִּים, אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ.

And I will punish him with pestilence and with blood; and I will cause to rain upon him, and upon his bands, and upon the many peoples that are with him, an overflowing shower, and great hailstones, fire, and brimstone.

Yechezkeil 38:22

While Rambam suggests a basic outline, he also reminds us that we do not really know how things will turn out:

Rambam informs us that we do not have a tradition about how exactly mashiach will come:

וכל אלו הדברים וכיוצא בהן לא ידע אדם
איך יהיו עד שיהיו, שדברים סתומין הן אצל
הנביאים, גם החכמים אין להם קבלה בדברים
אלו, אלא לפי הכרע הפסוקים, ולפיכך יש
להם מחלוקת בדברים אלו, ועל כל פנים אין
סדור היית דברים אלו ולא דקדוקיהן עיקר
בדת, ולעולם לא יתעסק אדם בדברי ההגדות,
ולא יאריך במדרשות האמורים בענינים אלו
וכיוצא בהן, ולא ישמם עיקר שאין מביאין
לא לידי יראה ולא לידי אהבה.

*All these and similar matters cannot be [clearly] known by man until they occur, for they are undefined in the words of the prophets. **Even the sages have no established tradition regarding these matters** beyond what is implied by the verses; hence, there is divergence of opinion among them. In any case, neither the sequence of these events nor their precise details are among the fundamental principles of the faith. One should not occupy himself at length with the aggadot and midrashim that deal with these and similar matters, nor should he deem them of prime importance, for they bring one to neither awe nor love [of God].¹⁰*

Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 12:2

Rambam also discourages one from focusing on these matters, as they do not promote love and fear of God and are not fundamental matters of faith. Thus, we shall not explore the matter further. However, regardless of how the events will unfold, their ultimate purpose is the same — the revelation of God's oneness. Thus, Yechezkeil proclaims: "I will be exalted and I will be sanctified, and I will make Myself known before the eyes of many nations" (Yechezkeil 38:23). Likewise, Zecharya predicts that "On that day, God will be one and His name will be one" (Zecharya 14:9).

Indeed, it is this aspect of the wars that has become most prominent in our liturgy. We declare the verse from Zecharya at the end of Aleinu and Psukai d-zimra, and the passage from Yechezkeil serves as the basis for the prayer of Kaddish:

וְהִתְגַּדַּלְתִּי וְהִתְקַדְשִׁיתִי וְנִודַעְתִּי לְעֵינֵי גוֹיִם רַבִּים
וְיָדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה'.

Thus will I manifest My greatness and My holiness, and make Myself known in the sight of many nations. And they shall know that I am the Lord.

Yechezkeil 38:23

Ve-Hitgadilti ve-hitkadishti, a prophesy predicting that God's name will become great and sanctified, becomes *yitgada(i)l ve-yitkada(i)sh*, a petition asking that His great name become magnified and sanctified. With the coming of mashiach, all of humanity will recognize and serve God. Yechezkeil stresses how redemption will mark the end of the terrible *chilul ha-Sheim* that galut naturally engenders.

Likewise, *Tur* (O.C. 56) notes that the phrase "Yehei shemeih raba mevorach le-olam u-lolmei olmaya" — May His name become great and blessed forever and ever — is a petition for His name to become great. Thus, the verse in Zecharya chapter 14, also referring to the culmination of the war of Gog u-Magog, states:

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה ה' אֶחָד וְשִׁמוֹ אֶחָד

On **that** day, He will be one and His name will be one.

In Kaddish, we implore God to make His name great, that is, to make His name one. This is troubling, however: is God not already one? Don't we believe that "*Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad?*" What is meant by "On that day, He will be one and His name will be one?"

The way to understand this difficulty is the realization that even though we *know* of His oneness, when we look at the world, we do not always *perceive* His oneness. Cognitively, we are aware that He is just and kind, but when we see the righteous suffer, the wicked prosper, innocent children die, and infants wail from the burning pain of incurable diseases, we do not see His oneness.

This is what we mean when we say that His name is not one. God's name refers to the manner in which He

is perceived — and His oneness is not perceived in the sense that there seems to be conflicting powers and evil that we cannot explain in the world. If He truly is one, such that everything that happens is a reflection of His will, it would seem that there should not be so much suffering and apparent inequity.

In Kaddish, the prayer about the sanctification of His name, we beseech God to rectify this perversion, praying that His name truly become one. This is the meaning of “*Yehei shemeih raba mevorach l-olam u-lolmei olmaya*” — “May His name become great (complete) and blessed forever and ever.”¹¹ In that sense, Kaddish, like so many prayers, is a petition for the

arrival of mashiach. However, the story of *Gog u-Magog* highlights that the process of the coming of mashiach will not be smooth. Indeed the very returning to our land precipitates a series of tumultuous events that threatens our very existence. While these terrifying descriptions certainly scare us, they also remind us to remain faithful even when the messianic process does not unfold smoothly. We should remain confident that the ultimate conclusion will be greater than we could have ever imagined.

Endnotes

1 This practice is recorded in TB *Megilla* 31a: אמר רב הונא אמר רב שבת שחל להיות בחולו של

מועד בין בפסח בין בסוכות מקרא קרינן ראה אתה אפסורי בפסח העצמות היבשות ובסוכות ביום בא גוג.

Rav Huna said that Rav said: When Shabbat occurs on one of the intermediate days of a Festival, whether on Passover or on Sukkot, they read the Torah portion of “See, You say to me” (Exodus 33:12–34:26), as it includes the halakhot of the Festivals and the intermediate days. They read as the haftara, on Passover, from the portion of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14), which portrays redemption from servitude, and on Sukkot they read “And it shall come to pass on that day when Gog shall come” (Ezekiel 38:18–39:16), which speaks of the future redemption. (Translation: The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

2 Indeed, we read about the same war in the haftara of the first day of Sukkot, this time from the end of the book of Zecharia. In that case, the connection to Sukkot is apparent: the passage concludes by describing how the gentile survivors of this battle will pay homage to God each year in Yerushalayim on Sukkot.

3 See *Shem mi-Shmuel*, Shabbat Chol ha-Moed Sukkot 5673, who records this ancient tradition.

4 There are other places where *Gog u-Magog* is referred to as well. For example, the Talmud (*Brachot* 10a) assumes that Tehillim, ch. 2, is referring to *Gog u-Magog* when it states:

(א) למה רגשו גוים ולאמים יהגו ריק: (ב) יתאבבו מלכי ארץ ורוזנים נוסדו יחד על ה' ועל משיחו.

1 Why do nations assemble, and peoples plot vain things; 2 kings of the earth take their stand, and regents intrigue together against the LORD and against His anointed?

5 According to most commentaries, the verse in *Yechezkeil* (38:17) references the verse in *Zecharya* (14:2).

כה-אמר ה' אלקים, האתה-הוא אשר-דברתי בימים קדמונים ביד עבדי נביאי ישראל, הנבאים בימים ההם, שנים להביא אתך, עליהם.

Thus said Hashem, God: “Are you he of whom I spoke in old time by My servants the prophets of Israel that prophesied in those days for many years, that I would bring you against them?”

Rashi has the following comment:

האתה הוא - באותן הימים יאמר הקב"ה האתה הוא אותו אשר דברתי בימים קדמונים ביד עבדי נביאי ישראל כגון יחזקאל חכריה שאף הוא נתנבא על מלחמות גוג ומגוג ואספתי את כל הגוים וגו' (זכריה)

Leadership and Mashiach

The theme of leadership looms large in the unfolding of the messianic process as forces of good and bad. The prophet Yeshayahu offers the following description of the *melech ha-mashiach*:

א ויצא חטה מגזע יששי ויצרה, משרשיו יפרה. ב ונחה עליו, רוח ה' -רוח חכמה ובינה, רוח עצה וגבורה, רוח דעת, ויראת ה'. ג והריחו, ביראת ה'; ולא-למראה עיניו ישפוט, ולא-למשמע אזניו יוכיח. ד ושפט בצדק דלים, והוכיח במישור לענוי-ארץ; והכה-ארץ בשבט פיו, וברוח שפתיו ימית רשע. ה והיה צדק, אזור מתניו; והאמונה, אזור חלציו.

1 And a shoot shall come out of the stock of Yishai, and a twig shall grow from his roots. **2** And the spirit of Hashem shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Hashem. **3** And his delight shall be in the fear Hashem; and he shall not judge based on the sight of his eyes nor decide based on the hearing of his ears; **4** But with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the humble of the land; and he shall smite the land with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. **5** And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.

Yeshayahu ch. 11

The prophet describes the mashiach as someone whose authority stems from his physical straight but his honesty, righteousness, and faithfulness; he shall sight the wicked not with a physical sword but “the rod of his mouth.” The mashiach will unite a fractured nation in a campaign of goodness and godliness. This contrasts another powerful leader of the messianic realm: Gog, the leader of a country called Magog. He too is a remarkable uniter, but of a very different sort.

יד) ורבותינו אמרו אלדד ומידד הם נתנבאו עליו זהו שנים האמור כאן אל תיקרי שנים אלא שנים (בפת"ח) שני נביאים נתנבאו נבואה א' בפרק אחד (אבל לא בסגנון אחד).

Are you he: In those days, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say, "Are you the one about whom I spoke in ancient days through My servants, the prophets of Israel, e.g. Ezekiel and Zechariah?" For he [Zechariah] too prophesied about the wars of Gog and Magog (Zech. 14:2): "And I will gather all the nations, etc." Our Sages said (Sanh. 17a): Eldad and Medad they [also] prophesied about it. That is the שנים stated here. Do not read שנים, years, but שנים, two. Two prophets prophesied one prophecy at one time (though not in the same style of expression).

See also *Metzudot David*.

6 Malbim, Yechezkeil 38:17:

ר"ל כי שם גוג ושם מגוג כבר ישכח בימים ההם עד שלא ידעו כלל מי היא האומה שנקראת בפי הנביא מגוג ושם מלכה גוג רק אז כשיבא על הארץ ויתקיימו דברי הנביא אז ידעו שזה הוא המלך גוג שנבא עליו וכו'.

The identity of God and Magog will be unknown in those days. People will not know who the nation or king is referred to by the prophet. Only then when he attacks the land and the words of the prophet are fulfilled will we know who the prophet was referring to.

7 Abarbanel, Yechezkeil ch. 38

הכוונה הכוללת בנבואה הזאת להגיד שקודם קיבוץ הגליות כשיבאו הנוצרים לכבוש את הארץ ישראל ולמשול בירושלים ויעלו עליהם אנשי המזרח וירכתי הצפון...הנה יהיה אחת מן האומות שיבוא על הנוצרים וילחמו בהם על ארץ ישראל גוי גוג וארץ המגוג שיעלו שם באותה מלחמה קהל גדול וחיל רב עמהם פרס כוש ופוט ושאר האומות.

The general intent of this prophesy is to convey that before the ingathering of the exiles, when the Christians come to conquer the land of Israel and rule over Jerusalem and against them will rise the people of the East... One of the nations that will come upon the Christians and wage war against them over the land of Israel will be a nation called Gog and a land called Magog that will come there as part of this war, a great gathering

with countries of many nations.

Many have suggested that the prophecies allude to Nazi Germany. See, for example, pp. 580-82 of the Artscroll edition of Yechezkeil by R. Moshe Eisemann (New York: Mesorah, 1977).

8 For example, Yeshayahu prophesies *be-ita achishena*, "In its time I will hasten it." The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98a) understands this self-contradictory phrase to mean, "If they are worthy, I will hasten it. If they are not worthy, it will be in its time." The Talmud thus informs us that there is a fixed time, a *keitz*, by which *mashiach* will come no matter what. On the other hand, if we are deserving, *mashiach* will come earlier.

The issue at hand is more than a mere difference of timing. The Talmud states that if the coming of *mashiach* is earned, events will unfold in a more glorious manner:

אמר רבי אלכסנדר: רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי, כתיב וארו עם ענני שמיא כבר אנש אתה, וכתיב עני ורכב על המור! - זכו - עם ענני שמיא, לא זכו - עני ורכב על המור.

R. Alexandri said: R. Yehoshua pointed out a contradiction. It is written, "And behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven," while [elsewhere] it is written, "[Behold, your king comes to you...] lowly, and riding upon a donkey." [The resolution is:] if they are meritorious, [he will come] with the clouds of heaven; if not, lowly and riding upon a donkey.

Sanhderin 98a

This distinction may serve as a way of reconciling other varying descriptions of the period before *mashiach*, many of which seem to contradict each other.

9 Though this reading cannot be demonstrated conclusively, it is the view taken by R. Moshe Feinstein in a fascinating *teshuva* that alludes to the topic:

...וברמב"ם אף שכתב בפי"א ממלכים ה"ד שמלך המשיח ילחם מלחמות ה' שיש מקום לומר שיהיה בכלי זין הרי כתב אח"ז בפי"ב ה"ב שרק מלחמת גוג ומגוג יהיה בתחלת ימות המשיח שמשמע שאח"כ לא תהיה

עוד מלחמה בימות המשיח, ובקראי דיחזקאל לא הוזכר כי מלך המשיח וישראל ילחמו בכלי זין אלא השי"ת יהרגם בדבר ודם וגשם ואבני אלגביש ואש וגופרית, והכלי זין שהביאו גוג ומגוג לא יקחום להיות אצלם לצורכי מלחמות אלא בערו בהם אש, הרי שלא יצטרכו ישראל לכלי זין בימות המשיח...

Regarding Rambam's opinion, even though he writes in the eleventh chapter of the Laws of Kings, halacha no. 4 that mashiach will fight the wars of Hashem, there is room to say that he will do so with weapons. Behold [Rambam] writes afterwards in the twelfth chapter, halacha no. 2 that only the war of Gog u-Magog will be at the beginning of the days of mashiach. This implies that afterwards, there will be no war during the days of mashiach. The verses in Yechezkeil don't mention that mashiach and the Jewish people will fight with weapons, but rather that Hashem will kill them with pestilence, blood, great hailstones, fire, and brimstone, and the weapons that Gog and Magog brought, they will not take for the purpose of war, rather they will get burned in fire. It seems that the Jewish people will not need weapons during the days of mashiach.

Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim 4:81

10 Here, Rambam applies a principle he articulates elsewhere: debate reflects a lack of tradition. If the sages have many debates concerning the details of *mashiach*'s arrival, it is an indication that we do not have a tradition regarding these matters. Rambam discusses this concept in his introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah.

11 There are two ways to interpret "Yehei shemeih raba mevorach l-olam u-lolmei olmaya." *Machzor Vitri* (quoted by Tosafot, *Brachot* 3a and *Tur* O.C. 56) translates the phrase as, "May the name יהיה is a contraction of יהיה (שמיה רבה) and blessed forever and ever." With this, we are alluding to the aforementioned statement of Chazal that God's name is not complete at present. Tosafot (*ibid.*) prefer to translate the phrase as: "May His great name (שמיה רבה) be blessed forever and ever."



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