

Geulas Yisrael

#9 Muted Messianism

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After twice failing to curse the Jewish people, Bila'm, the Gentile prophet turns his gaze to the end of history or to "acharit hayamim". At this point he is fascinated by the very people he intended to curse. He is envious of their heritage and jealous of their future. In his prophetic rambling he provides a roadmap detailing some of the events of the Messianic process.

He isn't the first to peer at the final chapter of history nor is he the last. Numerous prophets envisioned the end of days- most describing a world of universal acknowledgement of G-d centered upon Yerushalayim. Unlike Bil'am, however, these prophets describe the *aftermath* of the Messianic process but not the *process itself*.

Two Jewish prophets *did* attempt to delineate the Messianic *process* but each was rebuffed. Prior to his death Ya'akov planned to describe "acharit hayamim" but this information was Divinely withheld. About a thousand years later, during the traumatic first exile, the prophet Daniel intended to illustrate Messianic details but was instructed to conceal and seal this information. Evidently, we aren't meant to possess this information. As the Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 12:2) writes : "we will not know the details of the process until it unfolds". It is ironic that two Jewish prophets were restrained from discussing Messianic narratives while Bila'm provides whatever scant and general impressions we have. Why aren't we better informed about the messianic process? Why is this information withheld from Jewish prophets?

Firstly, because passionate Messianic expectation can boomerang if and when those expectations aren't met. The most infamous fallout of dashed Messianic expectations occurred during the late 17th century. Shabtai Tzvi – a false Messianic prophet captured the imaginations of between a third and a half of the Jewish population. His conversion to Islam and betrayal of his Messianic promises sunk the Jewish spirit into a

prolonged 100-year depression. This is just one example of false Messianism but throughout Jewish history the torment of unmet Messianic expectations beleaguered our people. Too many details about the Messianic process would only stoke Messianic fires and would further encourage Messianic predictions and prophecies. The details of the process are suppressed to temper these powerful dreams and visions.

Additionally, we aren't provided with Messianic details to maintain the tenuous balance between the two worlds every Jew inhabits. Jews live as Rabbi Sacks wrote "in cognitive dissonance between the world that is and the world that out to be". This is a healthy dissonance as we embrace our current reality while not abdicating our dreams of an apocalyptic "other" reality. However apocalyptic fever often runs high especially when our current world "runs dark" and becomes more oppressive. During moments in which our own world dysfunctions, there is a tendency to abandon this world while making a mad dash for the next. Too much Messianic fervor can upset the balance between the two realms we occupy. A radical example of Messianic imbalance is the situation of antinomianism- the notion that the messianic era isn't governed by the rules and regulations of history. For example, Shabtai Tzvi and his followers, feasted upon pork while reciting a Beracha of matir issurim- a corrupted beracha reengineered to suggest that G-d had abolished previous halachik prohibitions. Additionally, Messianic fervor seduces some into suspending rational or moral codes. After all life in the Messianic era is unbridled by the parameters of thee "here and now". Burying Messianic details ensures that in our zeal for this process we don't abandon the ground rules which govern our lives on the way to utopia.

There is a third reason that Messianic fervor is muted. Jewish redemption culminates when our fractured relationship with Hashem is fully repaired. This relationship began with such promise but was derailed by our constant betrayals and obstinance. It has taken our people thousands of years to rebuild that original love-as chronicled in Shir Hashirim.

As with any relationship timing is everything. Accelerating redemption prior to the complete repair of this fractured relationship is insensitive

and disrespectful to G-d. Our deep desire for reunion can't make us oblivious to the process. Too much discussion about Messianic details ignores the fact that we may not be invited to restore that love and redeem our people. One of the famous oaths alluded to in Shir Hashirim, demands that we not prematurely prompt the "end of days" redemption. Until He is ready and until we are ready, fast-tracking our redemption is impolite. The repression of Messianic details helps us wait with more patience.

As the gemara in Shabbat (31a) comments, when we ascend to Heaven, we will all be asked whether we anticipated redemption. G-d expects us to eagerly await redemption, but He also expects us to wait with pace and with composure. Redemptive fervor is "tricky" but without it we may wander aimlessly through Jewish History.