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# Haftarat Vayigash: The Mystery of Mashiach ben Yosef

In general, the topic of *Yemot Ha-Mashiach* is shrouded in mystery, so much so that Rambam<sup>197</sup> famously cautioned against excessive messianic speculation. This is particularly true with respect to *Mashiach ben Yosef*, whose very existence is questionable.<sup>198</sup> No *pesukim* clearly refer to *Mashiach ben Yosef*, rendering his legacy even more difficult to decipher. Furthermore, the narrative of *Mashiach ben Yosef* appears in more familiar rabbinic sources as well as eschatological chronicles such as *Sefer Zerubavel* and *Midrash Vayosha*. It is sometimes difficult to know how much weight to assign some of these more obscure texts. Finally, it is difficult to know whether to take the *midrashim* surrounding *Mashiach ben Yosef* literally or figuratively, particularly the sources that offer an incredibly detailed and fantastic account of the Messianic Era.<sup>199</sup> For these reasons, our purpose in this article is not to craft a comprehensive portrait of *Mashiach ben Yosef*, nor to fully analyze his significance from a historical or theological standpoint.<sup>200</sup> What we will aim to do is conduct a careful study of some of the classical sources on this mysterious figure, which will enable us to draw some meaningful conclusions regarding the legacy of this enigmatic personality.

The *haftarah* for *Parashat Vayigash*, taken from *Yechezkel* chapter 37, offers an uplifting vision of the unity that will be restored during the Messianic Era, a healing of the bitter divisions between Ephraim's Northern Kingdom, centered in Samaria, and Yehudah's monarchy, located in *Yerushalayim*. Dramatically portraying the peace that will reign at the End of Days, *Hashem* commands *Yechezkel* to take two staffs, one representing *Malkhut Yehudah* and the other *Malkhut Yisrael*, and miraculously fuse them into one. The two warring monarchies similarly will be reunited during messianic times.

At first glance the *pesukim* do not differentiate between the two staffs. *Malbim* (37:19), however, points out that in describing the merging of the staffs, *Yechezkel* first mentions the staff of *Yosef* and then the staff of *Yehudah* (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it sounds as if the staff of *Yehudah* is being grafted onto that of *Malkhut Yisrael*. What are we to make of these textual cues?

*Malbim* explains that the text is hinting to the two messianic heroes. The staff of *Malkhut Yehudah* represents *Mashiach ben David*, whereas that of *Ephraim* symbolizes *Mashiach ben Yosef*. The prior appearance of the staff of *Ephraim* indicates that *Mashiach ben Yosef* will be active prior to *Mashiach ben David*. Since *Mashiach ben Yosef* will unify the people under his banner and only then will be joined by *Mashiach ben David* (as will be more fully detailed below), the *pesukim* depict the staff of *Yehudah* as being grafted onto that of *Ephraim*. According to *Malbim's* exegesis, then, our *haftarah* addresses not only the reunification of the two kingdoms but also alludes to the midrashic tradition of *Mashiach ben Yosef*.

This tradition, however, raises a number of thorny questions. As noted above, no explicit mention is made of *Mashiach ben Yosef* in *Tanakh*. Where does he come from? The very need for a second messianic figure seems odd. Is *Mashiach ben David* not capable of redeeming the people on his own? And why was the tribe of *Yosef* chosen as the progenitor of this second messianic personality?

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<sup>197</sup>. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2.

<sup>198</sup>. Rambam, for example, never mentions the existence of *Mashiach ben Yosef*.

<sup>199</sup>. For example, *Sefer Zerubavel* presents a precise timeline of the events that will unfold in the prelude to the redemption, and depicts in great detail the roles that will be played by *Armilus* the evil king, *Metatron* the chief angel, and various other personalities.

<sup>200</sup>. For discussion of various aspects of *Mashiach ben Yosef's* legacy and historical development, see *Joseph Heinemann, The Messiah of Ephraim and the Premature Exodus of the Tribe of Ephraim* (*Harvard Theological Review* 68, 1975), 1–16; and *David Berger, Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah Son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus* (*AJS Review*, Autumn 1985, 10:2). *Heinemann* offers an excellent overview of much of the earlier scholarly literature on the subject.

Further investigation into the personality of *Mashiach ben Yosef* provides greater clarity yet raises further questions. One passage in *Massekhet Sukkah* (52a–b) in particular offers three foundational statements regarding *Mashiach ben Yosef*.<sup>201</sup>

The *gemara* (52a)<sup>202</sup> first describes *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s demise. The prophet Zechariah (12:10) refers to a great eulogy that will take place during the Messianic Era. The *gemara* proposes two possible candidates for that eulogy: *Mashiach ben Yosef* and the Evil Inclination.<sup>203</sup> The former position assumes that *Mashiach ben Yosef* will die, and that his death will be a source of great mourning for *Kelal Yisrael*. The *gemara* (ibid.) then recounts that *Mashiach ben David* makes a single request of *Hashem*. Upon witnessing the death of *Mashiach ben Yosef*, *Mashiach ben David* asks simply that he live. *Hashem* responds that *David Ha-Melekh* had already offered this prayer, to which *Hashem* responded positively. This second passage indicates that *Mashiach ben David* will witness the death of *Mashiach ben Yosef*, and that he will survive the cataclysmic events of *Yemot Ha-Mashiach*. The circumstances surrounding *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s death, however, remain ambiguous, as does the significance of *Mashiach ben David*'s survival.

Finally, based on another verse in *Zechariah* (2:3) and along with *Eliyahu* and the *Kohein Tzedek* (identified by Rashi as Shem, son of Noach), the *gemara* (ibid., 52b) identifies *Mashiach ben Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David* as “*charashim*” – “craftsmen.” Rashi (s.v. *charashim*) explains that both *Mashiach ben David* and *Mashiach ben Yosef* will have a hand in the construction of the Third Temple. What is the significance of this partnership?

A number of midrashic texts ascribe to *Mashiach ben Yosef* a military role. Some sources (e.g., *Agadat Bereishit* 79) identify *Mashiach ben Yosef* as the *Meshuach Milchamah*, the “priest” who will lead the Jews out to battle. *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Tehillim* 621) describes *Mashiach ben Yosef* as “*rodeh be-makeh*” – “ruling by the rod,” imputing to *Mashiach ben Yosef* a certain degree of coercive authority, perhaps of a military or at least physical nature.

Other midrashic accounts<sup>204</sup> that elaborate *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s warrior role are perhaps best summarized by R. Saadiah Gaon in *Sefer Emunot Ve-De'ot* (8:5–6). R. Saadiah relates that eight years before the redemption, *Mashiach ben Yosef* will ride from the *Galil* to *Yerushalayim*, conquering the city from a heathen army. The Roman general *Armilus*<sup>205</sup> will counterattack, however, recapturing the city and killing *Mashiach ben Yosef* in battle. *Mashiach ben David* will arrive on the scene, recapturing the city and reviving *Mashiach ben Yosef*. It seems fascinating that *Mashiach ben David* will revive *Mashiach ben Yosef*. What is the meaning of this event?

It is also curious that *Mashiach ben Yosef* is variously named “*ben Yosef*” (*Sukkah* ibid.), “*ben Ephraim*” (*Midrash Tehillim* 60, 87), and “*ben Rachel*” (*Bereishit Rabba* 70:5). What are we to make of these various surnames? More generally, what are we to make of *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s legacy?

It has been suggested<sup>206</sup> that *Mashiach ben David* represents spiritual leadership, whereas *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s leadership is more physical or material in nature. This accounts for *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s role as *Meshuach Milchamah* and *rodeh be-makeh*. It also fits nicely with *Mashiach ben David*'s clear superiority to *Mashiach ben Yosef*: The spiritual is elevated above the material. This account, however, strikes me as insufficient. *Mashiach ben David* too plays a significant military role, much as *David Ha-Melekh* was a first-rate warrior. Moreover, R. Saadiah Gaon (*Emunot Ve-De'ot*, ibid.) casts *Mashiach ben Yosef* in a spiritual light, claiming that *Mashiach ben Yosef* will purify the Jewish people in anticipation of *Mashiach ben David*'s arrival.<sup>207</sup> Thus the spiritual/material distinction does not suffice in accounting for the two messianic figures.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>201</sup>. The *sugya* in *Sukkah* seems to be the earliest source to mention *Mashiach ben Yosef*. See Heinemann, ibid., p. 2.

<sup>202</sup>. See also *Yalkut Shimoni Zechariah* 581.

<sup>203</sup>. The notion that the people will mourn the loss of the *yetzer hara* seems rather bizarre. See the *gemara*'s continuation for further discussion of this point.

<sup>204</sup>. See, for example, *Sefer Zerubavel* s.v. *ve-atta*.

<sup>205</sup>. Rashi, *Sukkah* 52a s.v. *ve-safdah* identifies this war as *milchemet Gog u-Magog*. Dr. David Berger, ibid., p. 155, offers a graphic description of *Armilus*: “Bald and with a leprous forehead, with one small eye and one large one, his right arm grotesquely short and his left unnaturally long, his left ear open and his right ear closed, *Armilus* is a figure of menacing terror.”

<sup>206</sup>. See, for example, R. Kook's famous eulogy for Theodore Herzl, *Ha-Misped Ha-Gadol Bi-rushalayim* (*Ma'amrei Ha-Ra'ayah*, 94–99), where R. Kook develops this theme extensively.

<sup>207</sup>. In doing so, R. Saadiah adopts a middle position between Rambam and the surface reading of many *midrashim*. According to R. Saadiah, *Mashiach ben Yosef* will only arrive on the scene if his intervention proves necessary. If the Jews repent at the End of Days, however, *Mashiach ben Yosef* will be superfluous.

<sup>208</sup>. Two positions among the *Acharonim* further militate against the material/spiritual dichotomy. Ben Yehoyada (*Sanhedrin* 98b s.v. *u-mah she-katav atidin*) addresses the jarring position of R. Hillel (*Sanhedrin*, ibid.) that a personal messianic savior will not redeem the Jewish people, because the Jews forfeited that opportunity during the days of *Chizkiyahu*. R. Hillel's position is so troubling that the *gemara* goes on to

To better appreciate our subject, I would propose that we paint the story of *Mashiach ben Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David* on a broader canvas by reviewing the story of the relationship between the tribes of Yehudah and Yosef. As a brief overview will amply demonstrate, that narrative is one of tense rivalry and internecine conflict.

The rivalry between Yosef and Yehudah begins even before the two brothers are born: Rachel and Leah vie aggressively for Yaakov's favor. Rachel is the beloved; if not for Lavan's trickery she would have married Yaakov first. Yaakov's love for Rachel arouses Leah's jealousy, who names her second son Shimon "*ki senu'ah anokhi*" – "for I am despised." On the other hand, Leah bears six of the twelve tribes, allowing her to claim the mantle of family Matriarch.<sup>209</sup>

With the maturation of the *shevatim*, we witness the sequel to Leah and Rachel's competition. Who will emerge as leader: a child of Leah or Rachel? And once Reuven, Shimon, and Levi are eliminated as possible candidates,<sup>210</sup> Yehudah and Yosef emerge as the only viable contenders for the throne. Yosef dreams that his family will bow before him, and his father, at least at first, endorses his *ben zekunim*. Yosef ultimately rises to the position of viceroy of Egypt, apparently leading to the fulfillment of his dreams,<sup>211</sup> although he never rules directly over his family. *Yaakov Avinu* blesses Yosef, "*tiheyenah le-rosh Yosef u-lekadkod nezir echav*" – "Yosef, you shall lead, and the brow of the elect of his brothers" (*Bereishit* 49:26). He also inherits the firstborn's double portion, as both Ephraim and Menashe earn a share in *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>212</sup>

Yehudah, on the other hand, demonstrates his leadership ability on numerous occasions. He recommends selling Yosef to the merchants, and he ultimately acknowledges his sin in the episode of Tamar. It has been suggested<sup>213</sup> that the incident of Yehudah and Tamar is specifically placed immediately following the sale of Yosef to hint that the latter section of *Sefer Bereishit* is really about the struggle for leadership of the nascent nation.

Intriguingly, at the opening of *Parashat Vayigash*, Yehudah approaches Yosef to offer himself in exchange for Binyamin, Yosef's younger brother. Yehudah's act of kindness<sup>214</sup> toward Yosef and Binyamin perhaps foreshadows his revival of *Mashiach ben Yosef* as portrayed by R. Saadiah Gaon.<sup>215</sup>

Ultimately, Yehudah clearly emerges from *Sefer Bereishit* with the upper hand: "*lo yasur shevet mi-Yehudah*" – "the staff shall not pass from Yehudah" (*Bereishit* 49:10). The brothers may have prostrated once before Yosef, but they will bow far more often to Yehudah (see *ibid.*, 49:8).

Later stories in *Tanakh* weave new strands into this narrative. Yehoshua is descended from the tribe of Ephraim; although technically not a monarch, his position as unrivaled leader and heir to Moshe perhaps indicates that the pendulum has swung back in Yosef's direction.

That movement continues with Shaul's ascent to the throne. While the sinfulness of *Kelal Yisrael's* request for a ruler (see *Shmuel Bet*, ch. 8) casts a long shadow over Shaul's appointment, it is nevertheless significant that he descends from the tribe of Binyamin. David, on the other hand, is of course a scion of *Shevet Yehudah*. This perspective shines a bright light on Shaul's incessant attempts to assassinate David: Shaul's irrational hatred stems not only from a personal conflict but from a rivalry that has simmered for generations. A similar point can be made regarding the

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quote R. Yosef, who seems to accuse R. Hillel of heresy. To limit the radical implication of R. Hillel's statement, Ben Yehoyada asserts that the *gemara* was merely asserting that *Mashiach ben Yosef* may not come; *Mashiach ben David*, however, will certainly appear during the End of Days. Chizkiyahu, claims Ben Yehoyada, was *Mashiach ben Yosef*. Ben Yehoyada's comments are significant on a number of levels. For our purposes, it is interesting that he assigns the role of *Mashiach ben David* to Chizkiyahu, a figure who oversaw a religious renaissance. For example, the *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 94b) asserts that men, women, and children in Chizkiyahu's generation were intimately familiar with the laws of purity. It seems clear that the Ben Yehoyada understood *Mashiach ben Yosef* to be primarily a spiritual, rather than material or physical, personality. Similarly, R. Chaim Vital's assertion that the Arizal carried within him a spark of *Mashiach ben Yosef* (see Ben Yehoyada, *ibid.*, s.v. *amar Rav Nachman*) similarly points toward a more spiritualized conception of *Mashiach ben Yosef*.

<sup>209</sup>. See Rashi to *Bereishit* 29:34, 35.

<sup>210</sup>. See R. Yaakov Medan, *Yosef ve-Yehudah*, available at [etzion.org.il/vbm/parsha.php](http://etzion.org.il/vbm/parsha.php).

<sup>211</sup>. See Rashi and Ramban to *Bereishit* 42:9.

<sup>212</sup>. See R. Medan, *ibid.*

<sup>213</sup>. Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 526.

<sup>214</sup>. This follows the simple understanding that Yehudah's intentions were peaceful. *Bereishit Rabbah* 93:6, however, quotes one view that Yehudah's purpose was antagonistic.

<sup>215</sup>. *Bereishit Rabbah* 93:2 highlights this point, portraying the brothers as declaring: "Kings are debating one another; what does this matter to us? Let the king debate with the king."

bond between David and Yehonatan: Their relationship is all the more remarkable in light of their families' bitter rivalry.

We now arrive at the First Temple period and the division of the monarchies. Yeravam ben Nevat – descended from Ephraim – secedes from *Malkhut Yehudah* and inaugurates the Northern Kingdom. The two kingdoms remain rivals until the exile of the Northern Kingdom, and at times the tension devolves into warfare (e.g., *Melakhim Aleph* 15:6, 16, 32; 16:12–13; *Melakhim Bet*, ch. 9).

Reflecting broadly on the development of the relationship between the two tribes, tensions seem to degenerate over the course of time: Leah may have been jealous of her sister, but we find no outright hostility between the wives. For the most part, much the same can be said of Yehudah and Yosef. With respect to Shaul and David, as well as the two kingdoms, however, violence is the norm.

In light of this history we can return to the narrative in *Yechezkel* with a fresh perspective. The staffs represent not only the reunification of two warring kingdoms but of two rivals whose relationship has been fraught with tension throughout.

Even more significant, we can now appreciate the true legacy of *Mashiach ben Yosef*. From a practical perspective, Rambam is correct: one messianic figure would have sufficed. *Mashiach ben David* could have captured *Yerushalayim* independently and *Mashiach ben Yosef* would have been unnecessary. *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s role, however, is not practical but symbolic: The partnership between *Mashiach ben Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David* is a profound symbol of Messianic harmony. It overturns not only the open conflict between the kingdoms, but also the tension that had been simmering from nearly the very dawn of Jewish history.

Furthermore, our thesis takes on even greater significance in light of our previous observation that over the course of history, the relationship between the tribes had descended in a downward spiral. The reunion between the two messianic figures dramatically reverses the deteriorating relationship, miraculously restoring not only civility but even harmony.

We can now account for the anomaly that *Mashiach ben Yosef* is variously named “*ben Yosef*,” “*ben Ephraim*,” and “*ben Rachel*.” Since the conflict originates with Rachel and Leah, these various surnames for *Mashiach ben Yosef* all accurately capture his lineage and significance.

Indeed, our thesis that *Mashiach ben Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David* are symbols of peace was anticipated by Rashi and various *midrashim*. *Yeshayahu* (11:13) states that in the Messianic Era Ephraim and Yehudah will no longer be jealous of one another. Rashi understands this to refer specifically to *Mashiach ben David* and *Mashiach ben Yosef*, explaining, “*Mashiach ben Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David* shall not be jealous of one another.” Support for Rashi can be adduced from the *midrash* (*Agadat Bereishit* 64; see also *Agadat Bereishit* 79 and *Shir Ha-Shirim Zuta* 4):

Ephraim shall not be jealous of Yehudah. But in this world, because they do not attach to one another they are jealous of one another. And so long as they [are jealous] they are in descent. But in the End of Days when they attach to one another they will be uplifted.

By invoking the term “*chibur*” (connection), the *midrash* clearly alludes to the passage in *Yechezkel* chapter 37. In doing so, *Chazal* anticipate Malbim's suggestion that the passage in *Yechezkel* refers not only to the two kingdoms but specifically to *Mashiach ben David* and *Mashiach ben Yosef*. The *midrash* thus confirms our thesis that *Mashiach ben Yosef* is a symbol of harmony.

We can now more fully appreciate another dimension of the *Mashiach ben Yosef* narratives. Despite Yosef's previous attempts to usurp the mantle of leadership (as evident, for example, in his dreams and the Northern Kingdom's attempts to defeat the Southern Kingdom), *Mashiach ben Yosef* accepts his assigned role as supporting cast to *Mashiach ben David*. This is implicit in the aforementioned verse in *Yeshayahu*: The *pasuk* states that Ephraim will no longer be jealous of Yehuda, and Yehuda will cease to be an enemy of Ephraim. The *pasuk* indicates that it is Yosef – not Yehudah – who will overcome his jealousy and accept Yehudah as his equal, if not superior. Yosef's willingness to cede the spotlight to *Mashiach ben David* further reinforces *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s role as a harbinger of peace.

The symbolic understanding of *Mashiach ben Yosef* enables us to account for a number of the anomalies we noted at the outset. According to Rashi (*Sukkah* 52b), the two *meshichim* will collaborate to build the Third Temple, which will usher in the Messianic Era. This joint project concretizes their newfound partnership – what greater symbol of unity can there be than the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the locus of the Jewish people's collective worship? Moreover, our thesis points to a new interpretation of *Mashiach ben Yosef*'s demise: perhaps more important than that event is *Mashiach ben David*'s response. First he retakes *Yerushalayim*, essentially completing the task begun by *Mashiach ben Yosef*. Even more significant, *Mashiach ben David*'s first act of *techiyat ha-meitim* is performed upon *Mashiach ben Yosef*. With this act of kindness, the reconciliation is complete.

The legacy of *Mashiach ben Yosef*, then, as so vividly portrayed in *Yechezkel* chapter 37, is one of historic reconciliation and reunification between two warring tribes and families, among whom it once seemed that

internecine strife might never subside. May our generation merit to personally witness the arrival of both messianic personalities, as well as the peaceful era they so magnificently personify.