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THE MESSIANIC PENDULUM

SWINGING BETWEEN HOPE
AND HURT: 135-2000 C.E.



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Yossi came excitedly in to his wife. "I've got a new job!" he announced. "The villagers realised they have no one looking out for Messiah and they want me to do it full time." His wife looked unimpressed. "What's the pay like?"

"Terrible."

"What about holiday pay?"

"Can't have a holiday."

"Then why so excited?"

"It's a permanent job!"

The story encapsulates the Jewish sense of hope and deferment which accompanies the Messianic Parousia. Jewish history is littered with hope and hurt, Claimants and Counterfeits. Only the notable were recorded for history. We will examine the influence these had and how the hope they engendered often overwhelmed disappointment. We will the Messianic movements and the evolved understanding of the notion of Messiah within Judaism from Bar Kochba [135CE] to Schneerson [1902-1994]. Mostly we will observe the emotional swing with the Jewish experience time and again of intense longing and choking disappointment as a pendulum movement. This was not always the case. Some reactions were more muted, some Messianic figures came when times were good, yet there is an overarching pattern to an enduring hope:

“While the particulars of the expected messianic events and era...changed from time to time, the basic belief in him who must come remained the same and sustained the Jewish people for two millennia.”¹

Almost a century after the death of Jesus, the Jewish messianic hope still burned bright. R. Akiba declared Bar Kochba the Messiah following a rebellion against Rome which would last for three years.

R. Shim'on b Yohai taught: “My master Akiba used to explain: A star [kokhav] shall step forth out of Jacob (Num 24:17) - this means Koziba [i.e. Bar Kokhba] shall step forth out of Jacob.” When R. Akiba saw Bar Kozba, he said: “This is King Messiah.” R. Yohanan ben Torta said to him: “Akiba, grass will come out of your cheeks and still the Son of David will not have come!”²

Maimonides would later confirm the accuracy of Yohanan’s prophecy:

R. Akiba was one of the greatest sages of the Mishnah, and he was a follower of King Ben Koziba [Bar Kokhba], and he said about him that he was King Messiah. And he and the sages of his generation thought that he was King Messiah, until he was slain because of the sins. As soon as he was slain it became evident to them that he was not the Messiah.³

Bar Kochba’s legacy was the rise of the notion of “Messiah ben Yosef” who would fight – and die – for his people but whose coming was essential for the coming of Messiah ben David. This theme would be applied by many Messianic claimants afterwards, even to their own claims.

The shock of Bar Kochba’s failure, coupled with the rise of Rabbinic Judaism and the codification of the Mishnah and the Talmud, put the Messianic hopes onto a backburner. Some Talmudists were concerned that they should not “ascend the walls” (precipitate the end by human activity), others felt that Messianic effervescence drew attention from the study of Torah and glorified human individuals. This was coupled with the fact that the rise of Christianity from a sect within Judaism to a dominant world religion meant that the term Messiah was defined in Christian terms and was accompanied by persecution.

The fifth century C.E. saw the rise of Moses of Crete. The decline of Roman rule convinced many that they were living in the last days. Moses sought to exploit this expectation, following his more famous namesake, and lead the Jewish people through the sea. He appeared on a Cretan promontory, urging his followers to fling themselves into the sea with the promise that God would split the waters and guide them safely home. Although many plunged to their deaths – men, women and children – the fact that they were prepared to do so showed both their confidence in his ministry and the charismatic nature of his personality.⁴ As his entire reputation was staked to his promise to split the sea, his failure was sealed the moment the endeavour failed and he joined the growing catalogue of false messiahs who were beginning to litter the path of Jewish history.

In the quiet after Moses, Islam developed and spread. The world adjusted to the new status quo and a hugely influential figure in Judaism, Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides) appeared at the same time as the next notable candidates, the Yemenite Messiah and David Alroy. The Yemenite Messiah had hoped to prove his claim with that staple of Messianic plausibility, signs and wonders. Maimonides recalls how he prepared to validate his claims and the tragic results which followed:

*Many Jews and Arabs rallied around this man, until finally he was apprehended by the Arab authorities. When asked for a proof of the divine source of his message, he answered: "Cut off my head and I shall come back to life immediately." Thus he died, but many people in Yemen continued to believe that he would rise and lead them yet.*⁵

This introduces a theme to the Messianic current which had been missing since Jesus: Those who continue to believe in the Messiah after his death. It was one thing to pin hopes on a Messiah who promised the earth – as long as there was hope, there was a chance of fulfilment. Once that person was dead hope often seemed lost, but linking to the belief in Messiah ben Yosef allowed for death to become a portal for further consolation. This would have validated the Messianic claims of Jesus from Jewish believers, had they not been squeezed out of the Jewish faith by orthodoxy and out of Christianity by bigotry.

Contemporaneous with Maimonides and the Yemenite Messiah was David Alroy. His appearance was at a time of international ferment, centred around Jerusalem with the First and Second Crusades bringing the might of Christianity and Islam to

lock horns for world dominance. For Jewish people, caught in their path the misery and suffering was likened to the “*ivetcha di-meshichta*”⁶ (Approaching footsteps of Messiah) or the “*hevlet-laida*” (Birthpangs [of the Messiah]). This notion, originating in Talmudic discussion, took form in this period of violent displacement and butchery and became part of the Messianic lore for generations to come. With his father claiming to be Elijah,⁷ Menahem ben Solomon took the name David, claiming to be the king of the Jews. His reputation was helped by legends that he had been captured by the Sultan and magically escaped, but he was ultimately undone by an (allegedly forged) letter claiming that he would transport the Jews of Baghdad overnight to Jerusalem – echoing Muhammad’s mysterious “Night flight” to Jerusalem from Mecca and back.⁸ As with his Cretan and Yemenite predecessors, failure led to ridicule and his name faded into the black history of pseudo-Messiahs.

With this backdrop of spectacular failure, Maimonides developed the notion of the Messiah in his legal compendium Mishne Torah. He decried calculating the time of the end,⁹ required success to validate messianic candidacy and insisted also on Davidic lineage, without explaining how to ascertain this. Messiah must also obey the commandments of the dual-Torah¹⁰ and prevail on all Jews to do the same, fight the battles of God and be prepared to re-establish the Temple in Jerusalem. He also insisted that the dual-Messiah should be stages in the life-time of a single figure¹¹ and ensured messianic hope was kept alive with the phrase in the Shemoneh-Esreh:

*I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah and, though he tarry, yet shall I wait for him.*¹²

Just when it seemed the pendulum of Jewish expectation and consternation had been stilled by Maimonidean rationalism, one of his keen students in the following century combined his “Guide for the Perplexed” with Kabbalistic thought to bring a new strand of Messianic mysticism. That person was Abraham Abulafia. His “mystical ideas were based on the doctrine of the ten sefirot (divine emanations) and utilised the methods of seruf (combinations of letters), gematria (numerical values of Hebrew words) and notarikon (letters of a word or abbreviation of sentences).”¹³ He focussed on the letters of the Divine Name [YHWH] and criticized the Rabbis for neglecting kabbalistic thought. He linked Divine intervention in history with Messianic theophany and thereby enabled the mystic to ascend on high and identify with the Messiah.¹⁴ The same time he provided a synthesis of the *Nous Poetikos* (Agent Intellect) with the concept of Messiah, bringing the mystical and

philosophical notions together.¹⁵ This means “the Messiah is not only a transcendent, transpersonal power available to everyone, in the form of the Agent Intellect, but also an intellectual power inherent in each person. In other words, everyone possesses the Messiah, at least in potential; the Messiah is a dimension of man qua man.”¹⁶ This revolutionised the concept of Messiah as it meant that any Jewish person could potentially become the Messiah and paved the way for Hasidic notions of metempsychosis.¹⁷ He travelled to the Galilee in a quest for the mythical river Sambatyon, encouraged by reports that the Monguls were invading from the East.¹⁸ He also journeyed to Rome to persuade the Pope of his Messianic status - a move which would become central for future messianic candidates.¹⁹

The end of the 15th Century saw the greatest catastrophe to befall the Jewish people since the destruction of the Temple. The entire community was expelled from Spain in 1492 and Portugal a few years later. With talk of the “Footsteps of the Messiah”, David Reubeni appeared and claimed he would unite the 10 tribes from across the mythical river Sambatyon. He approached the Pope to present a case for uniting forces for a joint assault on the Turkish rulers in Jerusalem. In so doing he stirred the interest of Diego Pires who circumcised himself and assumed the name Shlomo Molkho. To fulfil the rabbinic legend, Molkho sat among the poor by the river Tiber in Rome, as it was said Messiah would do, before the two of them approached the Pope. They travelled to Emperor Charles V, but, rather than convince him of their Messianic credentials, they made him suspicious. He imprisoned them both, burned Shlomo Molkho at the stake and Reubeni himself perished only a few years after this.²⁰

Yet again, Jewish hopes had been raised and dashed against a backdrop of terror and persecution. The pendulum swung against the Messianic Idea and towards a revived mysticism – the Lurianic Kabbalah – forged against the backdrop of Christianity being split by the Reformation. The political aspect remained, but rather than being overt and provoking the Gentiles, it was spiritualised to a quest for the reunification of the Divine Name and the Divine sparks – and, ultimately, the Shekhinah – scattered during the breaking of the *Qelipot* (husks) which had led to divine *tzimtzum* (contraction or withdrawal. This meant an inner Exile, not for people, but for God himself. His Shekinah must be restored.²¹ Such a task would not only require obedience to Torah, but miracles and a leader of Messianic quality. Many Kabbalists saw this person as Isaac Luria²², or even his successor Hayyim Vital. Certainly Vital

understood his own role as that of Messiah ben David following the early demise of Luria which consigned the latter to the role of Messiah ben Yosef.²³

Surely many would have taken comfort from the Lurianic Kabbalah, but for the fact that its esoteric nature and gnostic tendency by definition made it the preserve of a select few. The majority of Jewish people waited for the next landmark date, and the next viable candidate to arrive. They did not have long to wait.

In the mid-Seventeenth Century the Jewish population of Germany wore yellow stars and were taxed heavily. Eastern European Jewry was decimated by the Chmielnicki Pogroms. 600,000 lost their lives in a wave of destruction which paved the way for one of the most famous messianic claimants in Jewish history. Born on 9th Av – a day of great mourning, but also Messianic hope, in Jewish history, Shabbetai Zevi drew on Kabbalistic ideas but took them to a new level. Taking the thought that the Torah and ritual Law would be nullified at the coming of Messiah²⁴, Zevi introduced an antinomianism which was both shocking and refreshing. The Eastern European Jewish people saw his coming as vengeance for the acts of Chmielnicki. He was almost in a position to say and do as he wished. He declared his Messianic credentials by marshalling his troops, in a manner reminiscent of David Reuveni, and riding on horseback.²⁵ He had dazzled the world:

By 1665 the whole Diaspora was under his spell. From Poland emissaries were sent to pay him homage, and in Holland entire Jewish communities liquidated their positions and waited for his word in the harbors to set sail for the Holy Land.²⁶

As the auspicious date of 1666 approached, Zevi declared he would overturn the emperor, take his crown and liberate Palestine. His strong personality had won great support and many looked beyond his strange behaviour – such as pronouncing the divine name aloud – yet when his moment came, his nerve went. He demurred about wearing a green scarf in the Sultan's presence²⁷ and, when offered a choice between death and conversion to Islam took the latter option. The matter could have ended there, but for a brilliant apologist, R. Nathan of Gaza, who immediately explained this appalling act as submerging himself into sin in order to rescue his own people. With a Kabbalistic garnish (descending to the depths to liberate the Shekinah and effect redemption) Zevi's actions were not only palatable but acceptable to many, who ignored the parallels with Y'Shua some 15 centuries before. The Sabbatean movement

was the single biggest messianic movement within Judaism between the rise of Christianity and our own day and persisted into the 19th century with the Doenmeh.

In the 18th Century another movement arose within the Judaism of Eastern Europe called Hasidism. Many scholars²⁸ posit that this movement sought to neutralise the messianic element, but strains of it survived in stories of the Baal Shem Tov or the belief that had his teachings reached the ends of the world, Messiah would have come. Hasidism centred on a restoration of joy, especially in worship, and retained the possibility of the Messiah appearing in every generation, and messianic claimants such as the Stoliner and Kormanio Rebbes soon pressed their own credentials. If the Messianic element was downplayed at all, it was surely only in response to the shock of the Shabbatean antinomianism. He proposed *devekut* (cleaving) as a way of seeking closeness with God which bypassed the need for a Messianic figure.

*Hasidism decisively liquidated the disastrous messianism in the Shabbatean movement by investing everyday action with divinity.*²⁹

As the 19th century approached, 3 quasi-messianic figures proposed their different manifestos, the Vilna Gaon, Jacob Frank and Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.

The Vilna Gaon insisted that the time of passively waiting for the messianic Parousia was over. His advent must be precipitated by raising the Shekinah from the dust, not only by prayer and study of Torah, but by Aliyah. Linking the notion of a physical return of the Jewish people to their homeland with the messianic fulfilment paved the way for the Zionist movement and flew in the face of those who had decried attempts to bring about restoration by human effort.³⁰

Around the same time Jacob Frank was picking up the Sabbatean theme but putting a Christian veneer onto it. Using the mystical views of reincarnation of souls and metempsychosis, he argued that the spirit of Zevi and his descendant Baruchiah were both in him and proved it with miraculous acts. More than this, it had been revealed to him that Jesus was the husk and he, Frank, was the true fruit.³¹ That enabled him to draw credence from the Messianic authority of Jesus and elevate himself above him – an idea which appealed to many Jewish people who had suffered at the hands of Christian persecution. Frank, following the example of Zevi before him, converted to Christianity but retained his heretical views and remains an apostate for mainstream Judaism.

Also approaching from a mystical standpoint, R. Nahman remained within the Hasidic tradition. He argued that joy would bring redemption and that there was a potential messiah for every generation but also for every shtetl. His focus was the actions of the *Zaddiq* (Righteous One) who could bring about *tikkun* (repair) of the world through ascending to the presence of God. There would be many *tzaddiqim*, but only one ultimate representative – the *Tzaddiqay HaDor* (Righteous One of the Generation). He saw himself in this role as greater than Moses or Jesus, whose souls were in him through metempsychosis, and introduced a ritual – *Tikkun Hakaleli* – for atonement of sins, particularly sexual sins, but also those of Sabbateanism and Haskalah.³² He saw the rise of Enlightenment as an attempt by humanity to raise itself to the divinity, thereby usurping the role of the *Tzaddiq*. As a measure of his popularity, at one point so many pressed around him to hear if he would reveal himself as the Messiah, that the table at which they were sitting collapsed from the bodies pressed upon it.

Against the backdrop of these luminaries in the spiritual world, Theodore Herzl brought a messianic hope with a messianic methodology. Despite being acclaimed the Messiah by the Chief Rabbi of Sofia,³³ he resisted the accolade, choosing not to enter Jerusalem on a white horse, but his efforts and actions arguably had greater effect in the lives of Jewish people around the world than any of the three previously discussed. Sabbateanism was dwindling and the time of passively waiting was done. Europe was contorted with Napoleonic conflict and many saw it as the End Times. Those who trusted in gematria identified 1840 as the critical year and many flocked to Jerusalem as it approached.³⁴ Their disappointment when it passed led to many prominent rabbis in Jerusalem embracing Christianity - a pivotal moment in the first half-century of CMJ's existence.

As Messianic Judaism was experiencing rejuvenation in Jerusalem, so Chabad began to form with the Hasidic branch of the Lubavitch. It was not an inherently messianic movement at the start. Rather R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady insisted that he was the *Tzaddiq* as an embodiment of his own generation. From such unpromising beginnings was to grow a movement which would have Orthodox Jewish people from New York to Jerusalem declaring in posters and pronouncements: "We want Messiah now!"

Lubavitch was on its sixth generation leader, R. Yitzhak Ya'akov Schneerson, when Judaism experienced its lowest and highest points in two millennia. Firstly there was

the Nazi genocide controversially described by Elie Wiesel as a Shoah or Holocaust.³⁵ It proved the fallacy of Haskalah (Enlightenment) by the darkness of human deeds, and also the false hope of assimilation. Even second and third generation Jewish people could not hide their identity. Many must have cried for the coming of Messiah and urgent divine redemption during those days and many have posited reasons why God should allow such a catastrophe to befall his own people. Within a few years there was a Jewish state in the land promised to Abraham and showing on international maps as Israel. A seemingly impossible fulfilment had arrived and some saw it as a response of Western guilt for the actions of Germany before. It was one of the most violent pendulum swings in Jewish history, although many Jewish people will say “If the Shoah was the price to pay for Eretz Israel, it is too high a price to pay. I would rather lose the land and have my family back.”³⁶

Yitzhak Ya’akov viewed the Shoah as “the final stage in the collapse of the old world order thereby clearing the way for the inevitable redemption in the near future.”³⁷ From these *hevlet laida* (labour pains) he believed the messianic era was imminent. He used repeatedly the declaration *lealtar lege ‘ulah* meaning “redemption is immediate,” “it awaits just beyond your door.”³⁸ The uniform was pressed and ready, according to his famous analogy. All that was needed was “to polish the buttons.”

Speaking in 1951, as he became the 7th Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson gave a famous discourse “*Bati l’gani*” (I came into my garden) which alluded to a famous Midrash on Adam and Eve whereby their sins, and those of subsequent generations, removed the Shekinah 7 stages from the earth. It was brought back one stage by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob until Moses who was the seventh “And all sevens are precious”.³⁹ He succeeded in bringing the Shekinah back to the Holy of Holies. It is important to understand that

“the delivery of a discourse by a Rebbe in Habad is not seen as an intellectual exposition, but as a theurgic phenomenon, mentioning a figure from the past amounted to the process of mystical combination of souls depicted in Lurianic tracts.”⁴⁰

Messianic expectation fermented. The Rebbe declared not only that Messiah would certainly come in his generation, but that the present generation was the best prepared in history, having the benefit of all the previous mitzvot (Good deeds) of their forebears. Taking his predecessor’s analogy, Menachem declared a button

connects two pieces of one garment. In order to finalise the preparations the two parts of our lives, the sacred and profane need to be conjoined. He set up groups to promote this as well as promoting Noachide obedience for righteous Gentiles. His miracles were also the most notable from any candidate since Jacob Frank. His rhetoric built expectation from the 1960's ("The coming of Messiah is veritably close") through the 1970's ("Here, here, Messiah is coming!") and the 1980's ("Messiah now!") In the 1990's, a frail nonagenarian himself, he declared:

"All that I can possibly do is to give the matter over to you. Now, do everything you can to bring Mashiach here and now, immediately...I have done whatever I can; from now on you must do whatever you can."²⁴¹

Amid the froth and frenzy there was a numbed disbelief at the news of his death in 1994. Some followers berated themselves for their lack of faith, effort or achievement, others renewed their own efforts to see his vision completed through Chabad. Still others left the movement disillusioned, whilst some declared that their Rebbe would come back to life – or indeed had already done so. With characteristic Chutzpah some Messianic Jewish believers pointed out that they had been saying the same thing for two millennia and could they now also be considered part of the Jewish faith.

The pendulum of expectation and desolation had continued to swing as forcefully in the 20th Century as it had in the first and almost every century in between. Messiahs and Fore-runners, protagonists and propagandists had come and gone, Judaism had burgeoned under Rabbinic, Kabbalistic and Zionist philosophies, but the desire to see Messiah Now is as strong as ever. Some prefer to speak of a Messianic Age rather than figures, others see in potential Messiah in each generation awaiting Jewish faithfulness. Israel still seeks her true Messiah, pray her eyes will be opened.

ENDNOTES

- 1 R Patai *The Messiah Texts* P:xxi
- 2 (Y. Ta'an 68d) [cit. R. Patai P.28]
- 3 *Mishne Torah*, [cit. Patai *Messiah Texts*; 324]
- 4 The belief in these self-proclaimed messiahs and in their power to perform miracles could be so strong that it could override all normal instincts of self-preservation. Thus in about 448 a Jew appeared on Crete announcing that he was Moses and that he would repeat on a much larger scale the miracle performed by Moses at the Red Sea: he would part the waters of the Mediterranean and lead the Jews of the island dryshod to Judaea! [R. Patai xli Citing Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiae* 12.33]
- 5 A Hillel Silver xlii
- 6 One important example is the extremely influential (and recently reprinted) essay by R. Elhanan Bunem Wasserman, Ivetcha de-Meshicha (*The Footsteps of the Messiah*), written on the eve of the Holocaust; "The period that we are now experiencing is a special period, particularly for the life of Israel." He proceeds to liken these times to being in a dark forest surrounded by predatory animals and wishing to be "as all other people." A. Ravitsky P.171
- 7 Cohn-Sherbok P.108
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 H L P. 66-7
- 10 That is the Law revealed to Moses as the Torah (Pentateuch) and maintained through an oral tradition until codified as Talmud.
- 11 Prior to Maimonides, 3 theories existed that might explain the deaths and defeats of messiahs. One idea proposed two messiahs, the first from the lineage of Joseph, followed by another from the lineage of David. Another doctrine proposed the second coming of the messiah after his death and resurrection. In addition to these theoretical positions, followers frequently held that their defeated messiahs had never died but had escaped, disappearing into caves and other hiding places, and would return at any moment. H L P.67
- 12 From the Siddur (Jewish Prayer Book) and recited daily by Jewish people across the world.
- 13 Cohn-Sherbok P.114
- 14 M Idel P.48 He was also the first to share his mystical experiences (M Idel P.76)
- 15 So M Idel P.66
- 16 M Idel P.69

- 17 This is the idea that souls move across history and generations and can reappear in the current age from Greats of the past like the BeShT, Maimonides or Biblical figures.
- 18 It is quite possible that Abulafia thought, as did many others of his generation, that the Mongols were themselves the “hidden ones,” ha-genuzim, the 10 lost tribes of Israel reputed by legend to be dwelling beyond the Sambatyon River. M Idel P.58
- 19 The journey to Rome was established, according to Nachmanides, as a prerequisite to the coming of the Messiah... The Messiah will come before the Pope and declare himself as such: “...When the end of time will have arrived the Messiah will go to the Pope under the command of God and say: “Let my people go that they may serve me,” and until that time we will not say regarding him that he has arrived for he is not [yet] the Messiah.” M. Idel P.61
- 20 A H Silver xliii-xlv
- 21 M Idel 179, representing Scholem’s views.
- 22 G Scholem Mystics, 690
- 23 R. Patai, 29
- 24 AH Silver 159
- 25 Cohn-Sherbok 167
- 26 R Patai Pp.xlv-xlvi
- 27 The colour of distinction forbidden to Jews Y Liebes 96
- 28 Principally Gershom Sholem q.v. D Biale 541;
- 29 D Biale 540
- 30 A Morganstern 434
- 31 Cohn-Sherbok 144
- 32 Y Liebes 115-6
- 33 The Complete Diaries of Theodore Herzl, Ed. R. Patai, pp.310, 1599) AH Silver 68
- 34 The disciples of the Gaon of Vilna, namely that the next favourable period to their days would be in the year 5600 (1840), as the Zohar states: When the 6th millennium comes, in the 600th year of the 6th millennium, the gates of wisdom above and the founts of wisdom below shall be opened...and/God will raise up the nation from the dust of its Exile and will remember it. A Morganstern 435-6
- 35 The term is from the Torah and, far from its modern definition as Mass murder, means a Burnt offering made to God in which the whole offering is destroyed by fire.

- 36 Heard during an early meeting of Beit T'Shuvah, the Leicester-based group of Messianic Jews.
- 37 R. Elier P.2
- 38 Ibid. P.4
- 39 N Loewenthal 384
- 40 Ibid. 385
- 41 R. Elier P.16

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