

Messianic Ideas in Jewish Mysticism

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The Jewish belief in a final redemption brought about by a kingly messiah, the descendant of the dynasty of King David, emerged in Biblical times under specific historical and ideological circumstances which are gone long ago. Nevertheless, the core of the messianic idea remained within Judaism and became even stronger and stimulated Jewish yearnings and thought.

Around this core of messianic belief grew, in the course of time, a garland of interpretations which sought to accommodate the persisting messianic hope to the new historical situations and even more to the changing philosophical and theological thought. Regarding all the messianic testimonies handed down to us, we might find three major types of interpretation depicting the messianic events: There is the more traditional apocalyptic view, then a somewhat distinct philosophical-rationalistic one and finally a mystical approach to messianism.

Before describing the last line of interpretation being my task here, let us have a short look on the two former ones:

In the footsteps of the messiah insolence will multiply and honour will disappear, the vine will give its fruit but wine will be expensive, the government will be transformed into heresy ... the Galilee will be destroyed, the Gaulan will be devastated¹

And Israel will say to king messiah: It is not good for us to sit here. Why have you come?

To provoke war against us as before? And king messiah will say to them: 'Stand up and see the salvation of the Lord.' And he will blow upon the [enemies] with the breath of his mouth, and all of them will fall dead before him ...²

And then all the exiles will be gathered in.³

Then the Temple will rebuilt or come down from heaven and Israel will live in peace in the Holy Land.

These and the like are the common pictures coming to our mind when reflecting on Jewish messianic thought. A mixture of desires and anxieties, born out of the distress caused by the exile and dispersion. All the numerous descriptions of the messianic events throughout Jewish literature and history are characterized by these two elements: catastrophe and utopia, both elements which bear in themselves the revolutionary spark so often claimed for Jewish thought.

For according to these traditional scenarios

Redemption meant a *revolution* in history. Apocalyptic imagination supplied the details in which comfort and horror had an equal share and in which a persecuted and downtrodden people settled many a bitter account with its tortures. The apocalyptic war was in these texts described in all its stages. Israel, too, though ultimately led

through all tribulation to national restoration, would have to bear its share of suffering in the final cataclysm.⁴

We should therefore call this traditional Jewish messianism with its apocalyptic visions the *apocalyptic messianism*, a messianism which expects extraordinary marvels and miracles to take place in the days of the messiah.

Gershom Scholem in his book about the Pseudo-Messiah Sabbatai Zewi contrasts this popular-mythological or apocalyptic messianism with a *philosophical-rationalistic messianic tradition* which tries to eliminate the apocalyptic and revolutionary elements from the depicted popular apocalyptic messianism.

The best known representative for this rationalistic exclusion of the apocalyptic and utopian elements from the messianic scenario was *Moses Maimonides*. He might well have felt that such an "Utopianism not only arouses hopes and expectations" but also "threatens existing traditional patterns".⁵ Therefore Maimonides in his central halakhic work, the *Mishneh Torah*,⁶ gives a lengthy description of the messianic age as a rationalist would like to see it. It is a messianic expectation which is nearly devoid of all explosive utopian notions. Maimonides writes:

Do not think that the messiah will have to work signs and miracles or perform any spectacular deeds or resurrect the dead and the like . . . [and further down he continues: but] when a king arises out of the House of David who diligently studies the law and, like his ancestor David, assiduously performs good works according to the written and the oral law, and who compels all Israel to walk therein . . . and who will fight the battles of the Lord, then it may be presumed that he is the messiah. If he proves successful and succeeds in rebuilding the Temple and in gathering in all the exiles, then it is certain that he is the messiah . . . And do not think that in the days of the messiah there will be any departure from the normal course of things or any change in the cosmic order.⁷

Here, the messianic events are history's normal

events, without any revolutionary or miraculous upheavals—Maimonides even stresses the traditional and conservative elements binding the messiah himself to Torah and tradition, the written and the oral Torah. That is to say, the messiah will be a Jewish king who is himself a rabbinic scholar and who by means of normal warfare and policy will reestablish the Jewish kingship in Jerusalem and gather the exiles, all that without supernatural intervention, a picture indeed not very far from modern zionism.

This clearly anti-apocalyptic and rationalistic character of Maimonides' messianism, however, has in common with the popular apocalyptic messianism the totally historical confines of the messianic causes and events.

In both messianic conceptions the reasons for the need of a messiah are the destruction of the Jewish national and political independence, the destruction of the Temple, the physical exile and the dispersion of Israel, both the first and the second and the subsequent exile. These reasons were events taking place in time and in history. The accomplishment of the messianic desire then is the repair of this historic misfortune, such as the restoration of Jewish political independence, the termination of the exile and dispersion by repatriating the Israelites to Erets Yisrael.

The third conception of *Jewish messianism*, the *mystical* one, deviates from these historical confinements as expressed in the apocalyptic and rationalistic messianic notions—even when the mystical messianism is often mingled with the apocalyptic views.

Roughly speaking, the reasons for the need of a messiah are in mystical messianism transferred beyond history to the beginnings of creation or to the primordial man or even to the time before these two stages. And, accordingly, the messianic accomplishment is an act of a cosmic restoration and the restoration of the fallen primordial man. Here messianism does not have in the first place historical or political aims but un-historic ones, often a universal goal; sometimes this mystical messianism is even conceived as a restoration of the Godhead itself.

I shall depict here two major lines of this newly developed messianic approach, not con-

sidering their historical or literary appearance and disregarding the fact that both lines might be interwoven with each other—this being the case especially in the Lurianic Kabbalah. We might call the one line of mystical messianism the *theosophic-cosmical* line and the other one could be called the *anthropological* line.

The first line, the *theosophic-cosmical* line of mystical messianism, emerges within Judaism for the first time in the years between 1260 and 1270 in the works of the Castilian kabbalist Isaac ben Jacob ha-Cohen of Castile in his two pamphlets *A commentary on the Te'amim*, that is the accents of the Hebrew Bible, and in his *Treatise on the Emanation on the Left*. From here, this new messianic speculation entered the *Book of Zohar*, the main opus of early Spanish Kabbalah, written between 1270 and 1290.⁸

Rabbi Isaac ha-Cohen shares the basic notions of theosophic Kabbalah, already fully developed in his days. I am referring to the doctrine that the hidden and unrecognizable God revealed himself in a system of ten emanated powers, crowns or lights, known as the ten *sephirot*. From these ten sephirot emanated a whole system of good forces down to our terrestrial abode, especially the angelic forces governing all that is happening in this world. The most revolutionary innovation in R. Isaac's system is, however, the fact that out from this very fabric of ten good emanations at the same time evolved an evil emanation, the *emanation of the left*, in the later *Zohar* called the *sitra ahra*, the other side. In the words of R. Isaac:⁹

The most hidden of all, which is the cause of all causes and the reason of all reasons made as first of His creations, forces, which are crowns before Him and they are called the *World of Unity* or the *World of Singularity* and this is a world which is totally good. And it chooses only the good in order that the good ones may win the world which is totally good. And again, there is the decision of God's Wisdom which we may not understand, namely to create a world which is *totally evil*, in order to chastise the ones who go astray whether they might return in repentance ... and if not to destroy them.

These two emanations, the good and the evil one, both of them are developed and unfolded in a series of powers among which we find *female* elements at the side of the male powers, ruling together over the cosmos and history. On the good side we meet especially the couple of divine powers *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*—that is the emanated *King* and his feminine partner *Kingship*. They again have their sub-agents executing their rule. On the evil side we meet *Samael* and his female mate *Lilith*, together with their sub-forces *Ashmedai*, the king of demons and his mate, called the *Younger Lilith*. Both sides, as already stated, have their sub-agents and thus we are coming to the point interesting us here.

In the *Treatise on the Emanations on the Left* we read:

Samael, the greatest prince [of the left side] was extremely jealous of *Ashmedai* the king of the demons because of *Lilith* who is called the *Younger Lilith* whose likeness is that of a beautiful woman from the head to the navel, and from the navel downwards—burning fire ... And the [kabbalists] say that from *Ashmedai* and his wife was born a *great prince in heaven* who rules over eighty thousand *evil* and *destructive* angels and who is called *Harba de-Ashmedai Malka*, that is 'the Sword of King Ashmedai' ... he is also called *Gurigur* for he fights against the prince of Judah who is called *Gur Aryeh Yehudah*.

And in the same manner there was born in heaven from the side of *Malkhut* [that is the good side] a prince who is called *Harba de-Meshiha*, 'The Sword of the Messiah' ... And when the time of grace will come, then this sword will be taken from its sheath and the prophecies will come true ... and we shall soon see the face of our righteous messiah, we and all our people.¹⁰

From this quotation we learn that, according to the Kabbalah of R. Isaac, from the very beginning of creation there existed two opposing forces—the one called the *Sword of Ashmedai* and the other the *Sword of the Messiah*. That is to say, the redemptive messianic force was already there, *before* history began and its main

target is to be a *counter balance not to the terrestrial enemies of the historic Israel but to the likewise pre-historic evil force of the Sword of Ashmedai.*

Further, the two forces are not only active in the messianic times themselves but they have been fighting right from the beginning of creation for the unified status of the divine powers in the higher spheres, a status which will, in its turn, of course bring redemption for the historical Israel as well. The primary aim of this messianic force is, however, to overcome the worldwide dualistic state as it is expressed elsewhere in R. Isaac's writings.¹¹

In this system that later, with small additions, became the system of the *Zohar* as well, messianism, exile and redemption are no longer *historical* categories in the true sense but they become *theosophic* and *cosmic* categories. The history and exile of Israel and its redemption are but *one* echo of the universal events, though a central one. But already here in this system, we find the notion which later, in the Lurianic Kabbalah, is becoming the pivot of all messianic thought, and that is that Israel, by its works and deeds, may promote this redemption and the return to the primordial state.¹²

And when Israel will return in repentance ... then *Malkhut* will return to her former state with her Beloved, that is the six Crowns, and she will be amongst them.

Let us turn now to the *second* line of the new mystical messianism, that is to the *anthropological line*. Here we meet with notions which are not totally new within the history of Jewish religion but have their—though not identical—predecessors in the Paulinian *es'chatos adam*, the *Final Adam* who, according to Paul, is Jesus Christ.¹³

In medieval Judaism, the first representative of this mystical anthropological messianism is, as far as I am aware, a Kabbalist, deeply immersed in neo-platonic philosophy, living in the first half of the 13th century, namely *Azriel of Gerona*, belonging to the circle of Kabbalists in whose ranks we also meet the renowned rabbinic scholar Moshe ben Nahman—the Ramban. Azriel's kabbalistic system is not like the

Kabbalah of Isaac ha-Cohen, a mythological Kabbalah, but a distinct philosophic one. Nevertheless, the messiah and the messianic era are here bound to the emanative system of the ten sephirot as well.

According to Azriel's system, there are the three upper sephirot which are representing the total *divine unity*—and below them are situated the seven *lower* sephirot which are the powers of the *things created*, that is they are the powers which direct the creation. These seven lower divine forces of creation, however, are only in the blessed state of unity when they are really amounting to seven, that is, only when the influence of the three upper powers is coming down upon them. As soon as the influence of the three higher sephirot is retired from the seven lower sephirot, they count only six, and they are then in a defect state. And what is even more important: when the unitive power of the higher sephirot leaves the lower sephirot, these lower ones split into *contraries* and *oppositions*. From this moment on, we find among the lower sephirot the opposites of *cold* and *warm*, *love* and *hatred*, *life* and *death* etc. and by these contraries they from now on govern the world and the world is delivered into the domain of these painful opposites—as we know from our own experience.

These two opposing states of complete unity and perfection on the one hand, when there are no contraries, and the state of *contradiction* and *opposition* on the other, Azriel fits into three different epochs of world history. The primordial state—before Adam's sin—was the state of *unity* and *perfection*. Through Adam's sin this unity was destroyed and creation fell under the dominion of the *contraries* and *oppositions*. Only in the end, in the messianic age, the contraries will be dissolved and united again in absolute unity. Thus the messianic age is the *restoration* of the *primordial state* of all creation.¹⁴

As already mentioned, the first essential change in the history of creation came about by man. The primordial sin of Adam caused, according to Azriel, correspondingly the *dissolution* of the originally intended unity both on the cosmic level and in man himself as well. When God had created man he expected of

him that he should preserve original unity by keeping his own threefold human aspects in unity, namely his human aspects of being *father*, *mother* and *offspring*. These three human aspects he should have kept in complete harmony. But man did not succeed to keep these three aspects in unity and fell into the dominion of the contraries—and with him all creation fell into the realm of the opposites. Creation will remain subdued to this domination of the contraries until the days of the messiah, for the messiah "will be perfect" in all these three human aspects as well as in all the seven sephirotic forces.¹⁵ In the time preceding the advent of the messiah man might attain this originally intended unitive status for short moments only and by means of mystical techniques. But it is only the messiah who will be able to arrive at a complete and lasting unity which was the actual task of the primordial man and the messiah will then restore by his own unitive accomplishment all creation and all the emanated powers of the Godhead to their original united state.

It appears, therefore, that in the kabbalistic philosophy of R. Azriel, the messiah is not a *real historical person*, definable by worldly categories. On the contrary, the messiah is here the *perfect man*, the *Adam restitutus*. The messiah is man as he was intended to be from the very beginning of his creation. The messiah being the *perfect man*, is, consequently, the redeemer of all creation and of the Godhead itself. The messianic impetus is, therefore, according to Azriel, before all the aim of a mystical unification of man, its consequence being the redemption of the Godhead itself by the reunification of the sephirotic powers and of the universe, including Israel, of course.

From Azriel's more philosophical messianic anthropology we proceed to a system which is mythological again and in which we meet a combination of the *cosmological-theosophical messianism* with the *anthropological* one. I am referring to the system developed by Isaac Luria Ashkenasi, the holy Ari, which flourished in Palestinian Safed at the end of the 16th century—and I summarize some of the well known facts about Lurianic Kabbalah.

According to the doctrine of Isaac Luria,

the Godhead with whom the universe was completely replete, had first to withdraw part of his plenty in order to provide an empty space in which the creation could take place—for this reason the Godhead contracted Himself from its own middle to the sides and thus created an empty space in which He could accommodate the creation—this being the famous *Tsimtsum*. Into this emptied space the divine being emanated His light in order to reveal Himself and to create the world. In this creative process of emanation, however, a catastrophe occurred—the first configurations could not bear the plenty of light, the vessels of light which were supposed to receive the divine light of emanation broke and fell down into the depths and became the basis for the evil (left) side, the *sitra ahra*, the realm of Klippot, that is of the husks. After the vessels had broken, the Godhead once again tried to reconstitute the unsuccessful creative emanation: he began to emanate the *World of Tikkun*—the *World of Restoration*—and he succeeded. Finally, in order to accomplish this World of Tikkun, the emanator created the *Adam-Rishon*, the first man, who was supposed to accomplish the final Tikkun by his own deeds. The first man, in his zeal to accomplish this task, hastened to bring about the Tikkun, but it was still too early, and instead of bringing about the restoration, he caused a new fall of creation—and of his own soul as well. The macro-stature of the primordial man which comprised the macro-soul of all humanity, or more exactly of Israel, was shattered and scattered into thousands of sparks of souls. These sparks of Adam's soul, finally, were incorporated in repeated transmigrations into human bodies or even into lower levels of creation, such as animals, plants and minerals.

Well, this picture shows so far that *First Man*, Adam ha-Rishon, already in primordial days was created in order to bring about the final Tikkun, the final restoration of the broken emanated worlds including the divine spheres. This means that man was created to become—in a manner of speaking—the final redeemer who was supposed to restore the damage caused by the breaking of the vessels. But even after having failed in his mission, this task has not been taken away from man. The collec-

tive of all the souls originating from Adam ha-Rishon, which are incorporated in the Israelites and in other terrestrial beings, now, in this world, have to fulfill the task originally assigned to the primordial man. These collective souls have to redeem creation and the Godhead by redeeming themselves out of the present state caused by the broken vessels which are the cause of all evil in this world.

Therefore, strictly speaking, the *collective Adam* is the redeemer of the world and of God Himself. This act of redemption has to be accomplished in a cooperative effort of all the individual souls of Israel in repeated transmigrations (*Gilgul*). In this way they purge themselves and the surrounding world by religious deeds and by ritual, moral and contemplative techniques. Only when all the fallen sparks of the scattered light are purged and drawn out of the husks of darkness and evil the redemption will be accomplished—and then, as we often read in the Lurianic texts, *and then the messiah will arrive*. But there remains nothing more to do for the messiah, his arrival is merely a *symbol* of the accomplishment of redemption by the collective efforts of all souls of Israel which are, as already stated, nothing else but the souls of Adam ha-Rishon.

Only in later Sabbatean messianism, this collective messianic task was again imposed on one single historical person, namely the "messiah" *Shabtay Tsvi*. But even in the Sabbatean ideology, the messiah Shabtay Tsvi assumed supra-historical dimensions when his follower, the former marrano Abraham Cardozo (1630-1706), stated that Shabtay Tsvi could bring about the final *tiqqun* only because he is the *First Adam*.¹⁶

We may conclude, therefore, that whenever the exile is not defined in historical terms but in universal or anthropological ones, the Messiah becomes a universal figure whose functions are not really bound to history. He is then no longer regarded as a real individual person, and as the exile is basically not a historical state anymore, the same pertains to the redemption from this state.

And finally, we may proceed to the hasidic view which developed in Eastern Europe from the 18th century on. In hasidic thought exile is

not defined in geographical terms. The genuine hasid does not feel being in exile even if he lives in Eastern Europe—as one may learn from the famous song of the Kotsker hasidim where it reads: "To Kotsk you do not travel, to Kotsk you are wandering in a pilgrimage, for Kotsk is the minor Temple."¹⁷

In hasidic mystical theology, exile means being far from God and not cleaving to him in mystical adherence sometimes described as a real *unio mystica*.¹⁸ Therefore *geulah*, redemption, is defined in spiritual terms: take for example *Ephraim of Siedilkov*, The grandson of the Baal Shem Tov (Besht). He said:

The *geulah*, the redemption, takes place when the Lord is revealing himself by the light of the Torah—the real final *geulah* takes place in the fire of Torah and this is the complete *geulah* after which there is no more exile.¹⁹

This very view is expressed in the famous letter of the Baal Shem Tov to his brother-in-law, Gershom Kutover. In this letter, the Besht writes that he once was up in the heavenly palaces and there he met the messiah and he asked him: "When will you come, Lord?" The messiah answered: "When your doctrine is spread in the world and all are able to accomplish mystical unifications and ascents to heaven like you do. Then all husks will perish and it will be a time of grace and redemption!"²⁰ Again, it is not really the messiah who brings redemption but it is the mystical hasidic doctrine by which everybody should be able to work his own unificatory acts and by doing this, bring about the redemption.

In conclusion we may say, in all the mentioned mystical messianic doctrines, messianism and the messiah were transferred out of the realm of actual history. On account of the fact that in these, exile was conceived either in theosophical, cosmological, or in anthropological mystical categories, the messiah had to correspond to this notion of exile. Redemption is, therefore, conceived in the same manner: in theosophical, cosmological or anthropological-mystical but not in historical terms as it had been the case in the traditional, non-mystical,

messianic doctrines.

Of course, none of the mentioned authors would deny his belief in traditional messianism, but the ideological frame in which these authors are setting their messianic belief is far beyond history and national expectation. The real reasons for Israel's exile according to these systems are not the gentiles but meta-historical factors—and this is the case with messianic redemption which is conceived primarily in non-historical terms.

FOOTNOTES

1. MSota 9,15; in the English Anthology of messianic Jewish texts by Raphael Patai, p. 97.
2. Pirqe Mashiah *Bet ha-Midrash* 3, Ed. A. Jellinek, Jerusalem 1967, 70–73 (further BHM); Patai, p. 175f.
3. Agadat Mashiah. *BHM* 3, 143.
4. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton 1973, p. 9.
5. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
6. *Hilkhot Melakhim*, ch. 11–12.
7. *Acc. Sholem*, *op. cit.*, p. 12f.
8. Cf. J. Dan, The Emergence of Messianic Mythology in 13th Century Kabbalah in Spain. *Occident and Orient, A Tribute to the Memory of A. Scheiber*, ed. R. Dan, Budapest/Leiden 1988, p. 57–68.
9. Treatise on the Emanation on the Left, ed. G. Scholem, *Mada'e ha-Yahadut* 2, 1926/7 ch. 17, p. 259.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 260f, and cf. Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
11. Scholem, *ibid.*, p. 275, 9ff and 274, 1ff.
12. Isaak Cohen, Perush al ha-te'amim, *Mada'e ha-Yahadut* 2, p. 274, 14. Regarding the Lurianic Kabbalah, according to which the redemptive messianic act is the collective effort of all Israelites, see below and G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Kabbalism*, in: G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, London 1971, p. 37–48.
13. Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen 1961, p. 299.
14. Cf. K.E. Grözinger, *Theosophie, Historiographie und 'Anthroposophie' des Kabbalisten Azriel aus Geron. Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 14 (1986), p. 111–151.
15. Grözinger, *op. cit.*, p. 130; 146.
16. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton 1973, p. 814–819.
17. Cf. R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, The Messianic Basis in Hasidic Thought. *Molad*, N.S.I 24 (1967–68) p. 110 (Hebr.), where she stresses: "Even if the term Minor Temple is the common expression for a synagogue, the definition of the voyage to Kotsk as a pilgrimage *aliyat regel*, clearly shows that these hasidim saw here a real replacement of the temple on Mt. Zion." There is another testimony in the hasidic literature where the court of the Rebbe is compared to Jerusalem: in the collection *Mif'alot ha-Tsadikim*, ed. G. Nigal, Menachem Mendel Bodek, Hasidic Tales, Jerusalem 1990, p. 73, No. 4.
18. As quoted G. Scholem, *Devekut, or Communion with God*, in: G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, London 1971; K.E. Grözinger, *Neoplatonisches Denken in Hasidismus und Kabbala*, *FJB* 11 (1983); M. Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, New Haven & London 1988; R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, The Messianic Basis in Hasidic Thought. *Molad*, N.S.I 24 (1967–68).
19. *Degel Mahane Efrayim* 14d; and R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 105f.
20. *Ben Porat Josef*, Pietrkov 1843/4, p. 128a.