

## Jewish Messianism

*The belief in a messiah, a person who will redeem the people Israel and usher in a more perfect era, is has long been considered a core plank of Jewish belief.*

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING



The belief in a messiah — a person who will redeem the Jewish people, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, resurrect the dead, and usher in an era of perfect peace — has been evident in Jewish thought for at least two millennia.

There are scant references to such a person in the Bible. The Hebrew word for messiah — *moshiach* (literally “the anointed one”) — does appear several times, though almost never in connection with a redeemer who will come at the End of Days. In the Bible, the word is used to describe a king or priest with a special divine purpose. Isaiah 45:1 refers to the Persian King Cyrus as God’s anointed, because God caused him to allow the Israelites to return from their exile in Babylonia.

Several of the latter prophets do discuss a future age marked by peace and prosperity in detail — most especially Isaiah, with his famous prophecy of a day when “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” — but none refer to the person who will bring this about as “messiah.” Only in the Book of Daniel 9:25 do we see an explicit linkage between the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the arrival of the messiah.

This changes in the Talmud and the Midrash, where the redeemer is called messiah and described in a multitude of ways. Sometimes he is a military or political figure. At others, he has supernatural abilities. According to one talmudic teaching, in Sanhedrin 98a, the messiah is already on earth, dressed like a blighted beggar, sitting at the gates of Rome, awaiting Jewish repentance. According to several sources, the messiah will be born on Tish’a B’av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the ancient Temples.

## *When the Messiah Will Come*

The Talmud records a teaching in Sanhedrin 97a, attributed to Rabbi Zeira, that it's unwise to try and calculate the time of the messiah's arrival. He derives that practice from this teaching: "There are three matters that come only by means of diversion of attention from those matters, and these are they: The Messiah, a lost item, and a scorpion." Another talmudic teaching suggests that those that try to calculate the time of the messiah's arrival will be cursed. Maimonides later endorsed this sentiment, saying the particulars of the messiah's arrival are unknowable and that one should simply wait and believe.

Nevertheless, the rabbis of the Talmud speculated on this matter considerably. According to one teaching, the world will only exist for 6,000 years, which is the source of the notion that the messiah will come no later than the Jewish year 6,000 (roughly the year 2240 in the Gregorian calendar). The rabbis also bring down a number of teachings about the disturbing qualities of the time before his arrival, describing it variously as a time where the number of Torah scholars decreases, heresy is widespread, Jews despair of redemption, and youths humiliate their elders. One particularly grim prognosis comes from a mishnah in Sotah 9:15:

In the times of the approach of the Messiah, impudence will increase and high costs will pile up. Although the vine shall bring forth its fruit, wine will nevertheless be expensive. And the monarchy shall turn to heresy, and there will be no one to give reproof about this. The meeting place of the Sages will become a place of promiscuity, and the Galilee shall be destroyed, and the Gavlan will be desolate, and the men of the border shall go round from city to city to seek charity, but they will find no mercy. And the wisdom of scribes will putrefy, and people who fear sin will be held in disgust, and the truth will be absent. The youth will shame the face of elders, elders will stand before minors. Normal family relations will be ruined: A son will disgrace a father; a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies will be the members of his household. The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog; a son will no longer be ashamed before his father. And upon what is there for us to rely? Only upon our Father in heaven.

These teachings are part of the tradition that the messianic age will be preceded by *hevlei moshiah* — literally "the birth pangs of the messiah." But all is not so bleak. According to several teachings, like this one from Shabbat 11b, human actions can hasten the coming of the messiah:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: If only the Jewish people would keep two Shabbatot in accordance with their halakhot, they would be immediately redeemed.

## *What Will Happen During the Messianic Age?*

The core Jewish ideas about the messianic age derive from biblical passages, most explicitly several books of the prophets, and later elaborated in the Talmud. In the 11th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet says a "shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse" — the father of King David, and one of the sources for the idea that the messiah will be a descendant of the biblical king. The prophecy goes on to describe the ingathering of the Jewish people from "the four corners of the earth" and a vision of perfect peace in which the wolf and the lamb coexist.

In the medieval period, Maimonides made belief in a messiah part of Jewish doctrine, including it as the twelfth of his Thirteen Principles of Faith. Maimonides detailed his vision of the messianic age in the 11th and 12th chapters of the Laws of Kings and Wars the *Mishneh Torah*. There Maimonides lays out the basic description of the messianic age as a time in which the kingship of the Davidic dynasty will be restored, the Jewish people will be ingathered back to the Land of Israel from the far reaches of the earth, the Temple will be rebuilt and the practice of animal sacrifice restored.

Ever the rationalist, Maimonides was clear that the messiah would not perform any miracles like reviving the dead, a belief he ascribed to “fools.” This view generated considerable controversy, prompting Maimonides to write an entire treatise on the matter professing belief in the doctrine of resurrection. To square the circle, Maimonides wound up adopting a novel view on the matter, suggesting that the dead revived during the messianic age (by God, not the messiah) would die a second time, at which point they would ascend to the World to Come, the purely spiritual realm in which their souls would reside for eternity.

Nachmanides, the medieval Catalonian kabbalist who lived roughly a century after Maimonides, disagreed. To Nachmanides, the messianic age and the World to Come were one and the same. After the resurrection, the formerly dead would live forever in physical form. The messianic era would be a time of ethical perfection, in which the impulse to do evil would be annulled. Nachmanides acknowledged Maimonides’ view, but made his dissent clear: “We, however, declare that the people of the resurrection will exist forever, from the time of the resurrection of the dead to the World to Come, which is an everlasting world.”

### *Contemporary Views*

Messianism is still a prominent theme in modern Judaism, though many contemporary Jews have rejected belief in an individual messiah. Zionism has many messianic undertones in its focus on national redemption, a linkage made explicit in the best-known prayer for the State of Israel, which describes Israel’s establishment as marking “the dawn of our deliverance.” Among Chabad Hasidism, some claim that their late leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is in fact the messiah.

But many modern Jews reject this notion. In its 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the Reform movement, hostile to messianism’s supernatural overtones and its belief that the real Jewish home lay in Israel, rejected belief in a messianism that would result in a return to Israel and the restoration of sacrificial worship. The movement’s 1999 update to its platform spoke of being partners with God in bringing about a “messianic age.”