

The Postmodern Piety of Rav Shagar (session 8)

The Messy Business of Messianism

1. Rav Shagar, Briti Shalom, "On Messianism, On the Right and on the Left: A Discussion at the Conclusion of the Gulf War"

The Gulf War was accompanied by a heaping dose of messianic-apocalyptic decor. One million soldiers standing against each other, the worst destructive weapons in their hands, weapons of judgement day. 'For behold, today a fiery furnace has come' (Malachi 3:19)...

What does redemption mean for us? Does that new world order that President Bush is trying to lead have a messianic meaning? Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa (hereafter Rashab) explains that redemption is a matter of consciousness:

“God the Almighty created the world and gave... to all who are in it an order in which they will act. And this is called 'nature', which imprinted the God in all that exists. Until Avraham Avinu the world behaved according to nature, and when Avraham Avinu it began to behave as a miracle... until he gave them the Torah, because all the plagues of Egypt and the tearing of the Red Sea, everything was by miracle. And when Israel sinned, the world returned to behaving according to nature, and all the miracles were forgotten, even though they themselves were there. Since the world of miracles is above nature, and since they returned to the world of nature, they were forgotten, and they had no memory, like us, that we have a memory of the aforementioned miracles, and in the future that will soon come in our time, the world of miracles will also be used. And you will see his divinity and his government for all to see.”

If so, the question of messianism becomes much more delicate: it is no longer a question of facts, as unusual as they may be, or of miracles, in the language of R. Simcha Bunim, but the question of our ability to treat what happens as a miracle, as belonging to that world of the end of days...

Not infrequently, our messianism turns from a utopian into an ideology. I do not mean ideology in the simplistic sense in which Bloch perceives it, as a concept that is a tool of control, but ideology in the sense of a harsh concept that is neither attentive to reality nor to the person; an ideology built on the need to 'hold the line' between myself and what I 'need to believe in.' For one who is captured by ideology, the obligatory behavior is derived from “this is how it must be” and not because of 'this is how I am'. It may indeed become a tool, since it is easy for those in power to exploit the 'this is how it should be' for their own needs. Utopia, on the other hand, is built on inspiration, on true belief, and not on 'need' to believe...

Hence the great danger of messianism; It also often becomes an ideology. Its artificial pathos proves it like a thousand witnesses. The concept of Gush Emunim often grows out of the love of the land in the Zionist, simple, rooted sense, but often it sails to other areas, to the religious ideology of the love of the land, which is not simple and rooted. Most of the leaders of Gush Emunim are not people of the land and work, but rather people of the spirit and the book, whose disconnection from the land and physical work causes them to turn the connection to the land into an ideology. Their loose contact with reality creates in them a desire for reality, but this is not reality as it is, but as it should be. Their 'realism' is not an actual contact with reality, but a realism of what should be, a gesture or movement of wanting to grasp something unreal as if it were real.

2. Rav Shagar, Briti Shalom, 133-134

I will bring an example of the necessary change from the case of messianism, a term that has become vilified in our days: The religious right or Gush Emunim, is accused by various groups of being messianic. One philosopher has already written that "radical evil (political: totalitarianism) appears when religious faith or insight (or democracy itself) is viewed as a future present." In other words: there is a danger when messianism becomes a political argument, an actual political force. This is the opposite of the faith of charedim in which belief is suspended. Though one looks forward to it that he might come any day, one does not understand messianism as having actual meaning. Yishaiyahu Leibovitz radicalized the charedi position with his famous express that any messiah who comes is by definition a false messiah. But in opposition to his position, the Haredi position believes that the messiah will come, but through a miracle. Intensifying this position doesn't mean that messianism must be relegated to the realm of prayer, to the place of yearning, and its activism uprooted completely, as Haredim think...

As the modern philosopher Walter Benjamin expressed well, messianism as a miracle can be understood as a revolution, and not as a process as is understood by the Enlightenment. This is because it is unable of truly giving birth to something new. It can only recycle the old and return to itself... Leibovitz made eternal the gap and the duality between the physical and the spiritual. He rejected of course this possibility because he thought that the objective laws of nature indisputably rule reality. But the great innovation of messianism, that which the great prophets preached so enthusiastically is rooted exactly in this that the gap is not absolute, and the messiah will bridge between the objective and the subjective, he will come. Messianism as a utopian echo that acts upon us and inspires us, must continue to provide spirit for those who interpret faith. Messianism is indeed a revolution- a refusal, the place in which the desire of the subject bumps into historical laws...

Unlike the Haredi community, Leibovitz's position that we have described is not possible for the Religious Zionist community. Without messianism there can be no Religious Zionism, just as there cannot be Zionism, a utopian pathos is an essential part of it- "to fix the world" (l'taken olam). But how is it possible to resolve this insight with the previous one, that messianism as a future present is evil?

I think that one must preserve the gap or the charedi division between the messiah and politics, but just not in a Haredi fashion. We must continue to see the state in the category of messianism as "the beginning of the flowering of redemption," and to release faith in the messiah from the bounds of the prayer book. The gap will not be between an ideal faith and an actual one but rather between faith in the messiah as a present reality and faith in the messiah as one who will come, one who goes and comes, but one who goes and comes has still 'not yet' come... 'touches and not touches' "My beloved is like a gazelle Or like a young stag, There he stands behind our wall, Gazing through the window, Peering through the lattice." (Shir HaShirim 2:9). Like the beloved in Shir HaShirim, opening the door before him, will cause him to slip away and pass by...

Messianism is not a political argument but it can be the spirit that animates politics, the vision that stands at its base. It is never a present, but rather a future that we yearn and aim for.

3. Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History

Thesis 15

The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical timelapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years.

In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris. An eye-witness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows: Who would have believed it! we are told that new Joshuas at the foot of every tower, as though irritated with time itself, fired at the dials in order to stop the day.

Thesis 17

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.

4. Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*

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The world is not yet complete. Laughter and tears are still in it. And the tears are not yet wiped away on all faces. This state of becoming, of incompleteness, can only be grasped by seeing the objective relationship to time from another angle. As a matter of fact, the past, the already-complete, is there from its beginning to its end, and an account can be given of it—for all counting begins from the beginning of the series; but the future can be grasped in its reality, that is to say as future, only by means of anticipation. So, if one wanted to give an account of the future, one would surely turn it into a frozen past. That which is future calls for being predicted. The future is experienced only in the waiting.

239-240

We are seeking an infinite life, and we are finding one that is finite. The finite life that we are finding is therefore simply the one which-is-not-yet-infinite. The world must become fully alive. Instead of several centers of life, like raisins in a cake, the world must become fully alive. Existence must be alive through and through. That it is not yet so means simply, once again, that the world is not yet finished.

5. Rav Shagar, *Luchot V'Shivrei Luchot*, 356

When we ask ourselves if we should join with one social protest movement or another, we must ask if the movement merely partakes in the twisted rules of the same corrupt game or if it really aims at actual change. Some social protest movements call for change, but a change still within the assumptions and rules of the existing consensus. We hope for a more radical change. It is a change in the rules of the game itself, a new orientation, a new direction. This is because our justice, Jewish justice as it were, compels a society of intimate connection and not one of “man is wolf to man” even if the wolves are tied up and restrained by the chains of the law.