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SOMETIMES MASHIACH IS NOT THE SOLUTION

By **Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky** | MAY 26, 2020

The time and place to yearn for Mashiach is *especially* when we are at our magnificent best

"R

ebbi?" The voice on the other end of the line was a former *talmid*, now teaching in a girls' school. "Basically, the girls want to know if they should get their tambourines ready to celebrate and welcome Mashiach."

I received this call in the weeks between Purim and Pesach. A number of other calls soon followed, all asking some variation of the same question: "What's the point of doing anything (or davening for anything) other than awaiting Mashiach?"

At first, these calls imparted a positive feeling — "*Mi k'amcha Yisrael*." However, I gradually began to feel deeply troubled by the emerging realization that we have never properly taught our children about Mashiach.

I would like to voice two concerns, and then try to describe what should be at the heart of our awaiting Mashiach.

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y first concern is our deep ignorance of Jewish history — or any history for that matter. It is simply mind-boggling to hear people state that "Never has anything like this happened before. This virus must be heralding the coming of Mashiach!"

History quickly negates that thought. Cholera and typhus epidemics (and sometimes pandemics) regularly swept through Europe. Women commonly died in childbirth. Appendicitis was usually deadly. Any memoir written before "the war years" almost always features death as a central part of family life. The typical account of yeshivah life in Europe inevitably records the tragic *petirah* of at least one bochur. Towns were often destroyed by fires that ravaged the wooden homes in an instant, rendering entire populations homeless and penniless.

In more recent times, we had the polio epidemic. During the pre-polio-vaccine era (circa the early 1950s) if a child woke up with a fever, his parents rightfully worried that he would spend the rest of his life in an iron lung or a wheelchair (as happened to my first cousin).

This "never-ever" perspective extends to many other areas of current events. I often hear that "Never, ever has there been so much anti-Semitism." This sentiment is astonishing! Even putting aside the Holocaust for a moment, there are people alive today who have lived in countries where the normal legal status of a Jew was second- or third-class citizen. Throwing rocks at Jews in public was the norm rather than the exception.

And most disconcerting is the claim that "Never, ever has the Jewish Nation experienced such spiritual decline." Yiddishkeit literally disintegrated from the mid-1700s until World War II, with enormous numbers of Yidden abandoning it completely. The postwar renaissance is nothing short of a miracle. Of course, there are some issues that challenge our generation more than previous generations and there is much to improve, but that does not belie the general picture of the state of our Yiddishkeit relative to other generations.

I understand that a speaker may resort to "never-ever" as a rhetorical flourish, but should our real understanding of events be based on such an egregious dearth of historical context?

We need to teach our children history. And that history needs to include much more than dry names and dates and stories of *gedolim*. They need to have an accurate understanding of the experiences of the Jewish communities of each generation -- the daily life, the hardships, the challenges, the successes, and the wounds. The *pasuk* implores us to "contemplate the years of each generation."

Besides not allowing us to understand the events unfolding, our ignorance of history does not allow us to duly thank Hashem for the wonderful times we live in! How much *hakaras hatov* do we owe, for the plentiful food, advanced medical knowhow, tolerant governments, and incredible *siyata d'Shmaya* for our spiritual growth.

A wise man once said, "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it."

The second source of distress is the current Mashiach fervor. Klal Yisrael has had many "Mashiach is here" moments. Read the excellent "*Mashichei Hasheker U'misnagdeiherm*" (all 700 pages) of Rabbi Binyomin Hamburger, and you will get a feel for how numerous and how destructive these movements were.

T Even in best-case scenarios where no false Mashiach or ideology takes root, the fervor still comes with a devastating downside. Just as a person who summons up adrenaline reaches an exhilarating high, only to crash and feel an equally dramatic letdown afterward, so too do we become emotionally spent and cynical if our “Mashiach moment” passes by unfulfilled.

Someone recently told me a story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky (which the family later confirmed). A rav excitedly told Reb Yaakov about a member of his shul who was not *shomer Shabbos*, but was prompted by a “Mashiach is coming” moment to finally close his store on Shabbos.

Reb Yaakov told the rav to tell this congregant, “I [Rav Yaakov] assure you Mashiach is *not* coming.” He explained, “Right now, he is a *mechallel Shabbos* but at least he’s a believer. But when this frenzy blows over, and Mashiach hasn’t come, he will stop believing as well.”

T he absence of historical context and the danger of messianic fervor are two concerns. But more important is to properly understand to explain what Mashiach is all about.

One of my rebbeim, Reb Yitzchok Tandler, once used the following *meshal* to illustrate our lack of understanding of Mashiach and Geulah:

A man walked by a shul on Tishah B’Av and saw the congregation wailing and crying. He turned to an elderly man saying Kinnos and asked, “Excuse me, but what are you crying about?”

“Our Temple was destroyed,” the elderly fellow said.

“So what?” the passerby asked.

The man was a bit confused. He thought for a moment and answered, “It says that from the day that the Temple was destroyed, meat has lost all taste!” (*Pa’aneach Raza-Bo*)

“But doesn’t it say,” the passerby said, “that the taste is now in the marrow of the bone (ibid)? Why don’t you simply chew the bones and then suck the marrow?”

“Well, I have dentures, and they’re not quite up to the task,” replied the elderly gentleman.

“I see,” reflected the questioner. “You are mourning the loss of your teeth.”

When we describe Mashiach as solving our health issues, shidduch crisis, legal issues, and so on, we are looking for a solution to a personal issue. Our yearning has nothing to do with Mashiach; it has to do with our blood pressure, our bank account, the IRS, or our child waiting for a shidduch.

So what is Mashiach and what, in fact, should we be eagerly awaiting?

The Rambam, at the end of the *Yad Hachazakah*, defines it for us most clearly. It is perhaps the only halachic sefer dealing with Mashiach, and should be our firm starting point for any ideas or thoughts about this topic.

By listing what Mashiach will accomplish, the Rambam implies what we are missing in the absence of the Geulah and Mashiach. I will try to paraphrase his breakdown by describing four categories:

1. Mashiach will restore our nationhood by reinstating a central authority. We are no longer/not yet a nation in the full sense. A nation is an entity that has a framework whereby it can act as a unit. Without Mashiach, we have no head, no authority, no structure, no enforcement. We can have rousing speeches, ringing *kol-koreis*, an inspirational Siyum HaShas, and stern admonitions, but we do only what we wish to do. Even for the people who are sympathetic to the values expressed in the proclamations, there is very little specific follow-through.

Yes, thankfully we have our *gedolei Torah*, but even that seems to be subjective depending on who you are speaking to. For those who point to “The Moetzes” as “leadership,” I would ask, do you mean Agudah’s Moetzes, Degel’s Moetzes, Peleg’s Moetzes, or Shas’s Moetzes Chachamei HaTorah? Is it the Crown Heights Beis Din? And what about Satmar and others who do not subscribe to any of the above? And Centrist Orthodox and Modern Orthodox? And the many Yidden who do not fit into any of those categories?

In our current state, so many frustrating issues that require “law and enforcement” are in hopeless abandonment. So many of our monetary disagreements are adjudicated in secular courts because we simply don’t have the apparatus to effectively force the issues into our batei dinim. And this applies certainly to *agunah* issues and much more. Mashiach will be our king and will have the authority to restore our national apparatus; we will then be a nation with the full significance of that word.

2. Mashiach will restore the wholeness of the Jewish People. While we Torah-observant Jews rightfully take pride in our achievements, the vast, vast majority of Klal Yisrael is evaporating. The people who have married out, dropped their connection to Yiddishkeit, and/or have gone “off the *derech*” are all bona-fide members of Klal Yisrael. If we are missing 90 or even “just” 80 percent, or even one soul, then we are not Klal Yisrael!

We tend to think of “ourselves” — the Torah-observant community — as Klal Yisrael, and the others as a reservoir of potential additions. It’s the other way around! Klal Yisrael is the sum total of all of us, and we are missing 90 percent of our “self.”

Thus, the second mission of Mashiach is to restore “*nidchei Yisrael*,” the forgotten souls of Klal Yisrael.

3. Mashiach will restore Torah to Klal Yisrael. We identify ourselves as “*shomrei Torah u’mitzvos*,” and we do live up to that description. Yet we keep at best a minority of the mitzvos. We do not observe *Kodshim*, *Taharos*, much of *Zeraim*, *Sanhedrin*, *Knasos*, and on and on. True, it is not our fault, but if we genuinely believe that mitzvos perfect a man, we are woefully lacking. Mashiach’s third task is to restore all of the mitzvos that were performed at the time of the Beis Hamikdash.

4. Mashiach will restore the Divine Presence. We have no way to describe Shechinah or Divine Presence, except perhaps as “a sense of immanence or connection.” One malaise of our times is that although we seem to be doing everything right, we still don’t feel a sense of reciprocity; i.e. that Hashem is there, waiting for us and accepting our offerings.

In *parshas Shemini* the Divine Presence is described as the fire descending from Heaven and “consuming” our offering. There was a time when we saw and heard that “Your deeds and offerings are pleasing to Me.”

Of all the mitzvos, *aliyah l’regei* expresses this sense of connection most strongly. The Rambam (*Beis Habechirah* 1:1) says that the purpose of the Beis Hamikdash is for korbanos and *aliyah l’regei*. The mitzvah of *aliyah l’regei* is meant to recharge our spiritual batteries by “connecting” to Hashem three times a year; as the *Kuzari* describes it, “to be invited to sit at the King’s table.” Mashiach’s fourth task, then, is to restore that sense of “presence” and “connection” that we describe as the Shechinah.

One Tishah B’Av, I heard this point powerfully presented by Rav Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik . He said, “People say to me, ‘We have Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim, and even the Kosel. Why are we still mourning as intensely as ever?’

He said, “I reply, ‘Have you ever seen an estranged son sitting at his father’s table? There is only one foot of distance between their bodies, but a thousand miles between their hearts! This creates an unbearable tension, intensified, not ameliorated, by their physical proximity.’ So too, to be so close, yet so estranged...”

Thus the lack of HaKadosh Baruch Hu’s “Presence” or palpable manifestation of any desire to “connect” with us is the fourth aspect of *galus* that Mashiach will rectify.

So how does our understanding of these four losses translate into yearning for Mashiach? When and how should we express our yearning? Imagine that you are at a wedding of very fine people. At the end of the *chasunah*, as you wish mazel tov to one of the *mechutanim*, he remarks, “I wish that my late parents were alive and with us tonight.” Your eyes mist and you cluck sympathetically, and he continues, “...because they would have picked up the bill!”

What would you think of him?

When we wish for Mashiach to pay our bills, heal our ailments, or help us with any other of our myriad needs, is that called yearning for Mashiach?

What is this yearning supposed to feel like? To me, it is a feeling like the painful hollowness and sorrow I experience when I attend a simchah where a family member is missing: where a parent has not come to a wedding out of anger; a child has not invited a parent out of spite; a son fallen in battle is not there; or a “lost” daughter is missing in the family picture. Because of the extraordinary joy that should have been felt, the emptiness is so sharply painful.

Quite a few years ago, I attended the wedding of a wonderful bochur. He was a budding *talmid chacham*, talented in many areas, handsome, and full of personality. His father had passed away a few years back, but the family had continued on resolutely and flourished. The *mechutanim* were very prominent people, and the *ruach* at the wedding was heavenly.

After the *badeken*, the spirited crowd danced the regal *chassan* to his room, and I walked in to help him with some last-minute items. As soon as the door closed, the *chassan* put his arms around me, crumpled, and sobbed uncontrollably. I understood. The event was magnificent — but someone was missing. And that meant that everything was missing.

The time and place to yearn for Mashiach is *especially* when we are at our magnificent best. We have Torah and *gedulah*; we are marrying off our wonderful daughter to a great *metzuyan*. Everything and everybody are in attendance, and everything we could have wished for has been fulfilled.

But as we look around, a great void fills us. The surrounding laughter and gaiety throw into stark relief the pain and emptiness that we feel. And we say to ourselves, “What’s the point of it? *He* is not here, nor is *His* presence felt.”

That is yearning for Mashiach.

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