

Yom Kippur Musing - 5776

Hope --The Impossible Possibility

Annually with the advent of Elul my heart, soul and mind turns in anxious expectation toward the Days of Awe. This inward turning in part leads me to theological musings. This year HaShem has sent me on a journey of inquiry and reflection on the Messiah. I wondered why would HaShem send me to the Messiah considering that the two of us (the Messiah and I) have had quite a tumultuous and unbridled philosophical and theological relationship. I have often thought that the fools/sages of Helm were quite correct. It is recounted that it was the given occupation of one of the dwellers in the town of Helm to sit at the town gate and watch for the coming of the Messiah. Day in and day out he sat and waited for the Messiah so that he could announce to all his arrival. One day one of town's residents, on passing by this gentleman inquired of him- "How do you like your job? Is it fulfilling for you?" The fool/sage answered- "well it does not pay as much as I would like but the job security is great. I never have to worry about being out of a job." On many occasions I have agreed with his assessment.

Even with a close eye on the relevant Tanak passages, I have run the gamut on the issue of the particulars of who, what and when of the Messianic concept. The Messiah is coming one day, the Messiah is coming in my lifetime, the Messiah is never coming and the Messiah is an archaic outdated concept that has no or a very limited place in post modern theological and philosophical speculation. I have at times thought all of these statements were true and was convinced as a Biblicist and philosopher that I was quite correct in my assessments. Even though I would quickly concede that current world events are no better or worst than any other era (although we always think that our era is the worst) in terms of the waywardness and sinfulness of the present age, I am dumbfounded with the sheer idiocy of how we treat our fellow humans and our planet. Rather than being caretakers of each other and our world (Bereshit/Genesis 1:26), we have become the destroyers of both. If it were not for the righteous few, I would be compelled to believe that humanity has lost any semblance of or remembrance that we are created in *b'tzelem elohim* or the image of God (Bereshit/Genesis 1:26). If at any historic time period we needed a messiah then this age should certainly merit the Messiah's coming

Why is it that in the eight statements of Saadia, in the principles of R. Hananel B. Hushiel and in the 13 articles of Maimonides, is belief in the coming of the Messiah required? The fact that God exists, is ONE and is incorporeal (always), I understand and I have never thought otherwise. The belief in Revelation or G-d's self-willed, self-disclosure, although some would consider this irrational, my rational mind grasp the concept and concurs. That we have God given laws, I find no fault with, because it is only in my being commanded that I find my being or true essence of humanness. Being commanded by God, the *Ground of Being* is my assurance against the ontological threat of non-being (Paul Tillich). It is by being grounded in the *Ground of Being* that I can therefore only find *my being*. I am fine and on board with the Rambam's principles until we get to the belief in the coming of the Messiah. Why should I feel compelled to believe that? Why, according to the Rambam is this a foundational principle for being an Israelite? Why do we repeat the belief in the coming of the Messiah in our liturgical prayers, as in the 15th berachot of the Amidah?

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Speedily cause the offspring of Your servant David to flourish,
and let him be exalted by Your saving power,
for we wait all day long for Your salvation.
Blessed are You, O Lord, who causes salvation to flourish.

Why do we recall our belief in the Messiah in the liturgical song Yigdal?

By the End of Days He will send our Messiah, to redeem those longing for His final salvation.

From childhood Israelites are taught that it is our responsibility for *Tikkun Olam* – repairing the world. We are also taught that the world stands on three pillars- Torah, service (of G-d) and on acts of human kindness (Pirkei Avot 1:2). Since believing in the coming of the Messiah is not required for our world to endure then why is Judaism so dependent on this belief?

Generation of Israelites and gentiles were upright God-fearing individuals who performed good deeds and mitzvot. The next generation came did mitzvot and they also passed away. Another generation did their part for tikkun olam (repairing the world), however they too are no longer here. If Moschiah did not come in the time of Moshe Rebennu why would Moschiah come now? Since Moschiah failed to appear during the days of the Rambam, why would Moschiah appear now? Moschiah did not come to the world despite the life transformative deeds of Elder William Saunders Crowdy, why then should I or anyone else expect Moschiah to appear right here and right now? Moschiah has also tarried in coming despite the unimaginable near perfect life of

Esther Parrish Smith. If these ancestors, despite their great work, did not merit Moschiah's advent, why should we think that Moschiah might appear, as we so often recount "in our lifetime and in our days?" What was the value of what these ancestors did their entire lives? Did they live their lives in vain?

Behold I Will Send You Elijah The Prophet... (Malachi 4:5)

The answers to my conundrums came from a quite serendipitous channel. Critical events in life have the potential to transform and reorder. My Mom, Esther Parrish Smith (Z"L) died a little over a year ago and this past year without her has caused me to think a bit differently concerning many things, albeit mostly theological. With her death I often felt as if a piece of my being has been vanquished and vanished. I was lost. Me, the consummate goal oriented person was wandering intellectually and philosophically and no particular destination in mind. My spiritual being was tittering. One day while sitting at my desk in the library and after many days of being unable to write, suffering from a major grief stricken writer's block, I received a visit (that I will not recount here) from a man whom on first appearance was a stranger but afterwards I am convinced I knew his identity. This man was none other than the renown, ubiquitous, time traveling prophet. Eliyahu

(Elijah) the one who can command fire from heaven (Malakhim A/ I Kings 18:30-39), the Eliyahu who does not die a human death but rather ascends to heaven in the whirlwind (Malakhim B /II Kings 2:11), this Eliyahu opened my mind and my heart. Periodically throughout ancient and contemporary Israelite lore Eliyahu has been known to appear to help Rabbis trapped in difficult life situations. He is believed to be present at every circumcision and is an anxiously expected visitor at every Seder table. This visit from the time traveler drew my attention to a Tanak passage that I had visited many times before --“behold I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.” (Malachi 4:5). More messianic talk but that day, unlike so many others, Eliyahu opened my heart to receive the message and the promise.

The Eternal One said in the very beginning of time that we are going somewhere in this world. Our Rabbis taught that in the beginning it was said “and the spirit of G-d hovered over the face of the deep” (Bereshit/Genesis 1:2). What was this spirit of G-d? It was the soul of Moschiah.

‘And the spirit of God hovers’ refers to the spirit of the Messiah, in line with the following verse of Scripture: ‘and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him –(Isaiah 11:2)
{Bereshit Rabbah 2:4}

The spirit of the Messiah hovers over and permeates the entirety of the created order and it was in the initial will and intent of G-d that Moschiah and the Messianic age would come. G-d has ordained that humanity is not a hodge -podge of people trying to do good deeds. There is a plan, there is a vision, there is a hope and there is a goal for this world. The belief in Moschiah helps us not to be disillusioned. Our ancestor's lives were not lived in vain. They lived their lives in the *sensible* world, however their valor and good deeds were mere reflections of the eternal forms of goodness, piety, holiness and valor that is present in their eternal forms in the *intelligible* realm (Plato). Their good deeds affected the world for the good. One may look at the world and say that nothing has changed. Racism still exist, human suffering abounds and evil is just as prevalent as ever, however the ongoing effects of good acts far outweigh the evil that invades the world. Their lives had value and their lives had meaning beyond what we can discern with our natural eyes or with our rational minds. We as a people have survived our sojourn in the grips of the Egyptian Pharaoh's hand, we have prevailed despite the horrific Atlantic slave trade and we are surviving the penal colony that America has become for too many of its citizens. We have crossed every river, jumped over every trench, scaled every mountain and overcome all obstacles, not on our own merits, but on the merits of the good that our G-d

fearing ancestors did. Today we still sing that Black spiritual “my soul looks back and wonders how I got over.” Wonder no longer. We got over by looking back and glancing back at those who came before. We got over by grasping their coattails. They got over by holding onto their ancestors coat tails. On the merits of their good deeds we are sustained and by our good deeds the next generation will be sustained. All together, *collectively*, we have the ability to move forward. All of the good deeds of all those years are being held en masse. Just imagine if we could draw a line from Adam and Eve until today we would see a continuum of good. Of course we would see a continuum of evil too but the good is what sustains the world. Yes, the world endures because of three activities- Torah, worship of G-d and acts of loving-kindness. The remembrance of evil is short lived (3-4 generations) but the good that is done is efficacious for generations.

Just as Moshe’s request of G-d to see His glory (Shemot/ Exodus 33:18) is declined, we the living cannot see G-d’s glory nor can we discern G-d’s essence in this present world. Graciously, G-d does grant Moshe the privilege to see His back or His reflection. What is this reflection that we are allowed to see? HaShem said-

“I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. (Shemot/ Exodus 3:19)

We are permitted to see a shadowy reflection of the goodness of God. The kind and considerate acts of loving kindness we do, every mitvah performed, all unselfish and selfless acts, each deed of valor, all the merciful deeds, all the mercy shown and granted in this world are but reflections, albeit miniscule reflections, of G-d's goodness.

I do not subscribe to the Calvinist (John Calvin) doctrine of the total depravity of humankind. Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, erred greatly in his assessment that human beings sin by necessity. We are capable of doing good and even after God declared this,

And the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Bereshit/ Genesis 6:5
– JPS)

He still continues to give us commands. We are capable of doing the good even if we do not always do it. We are not capable of perfection, because G-d is only perfect, but we can do the good. God does not command us the impossible.

If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? And if thou doest not well, sin coucheth at the door; and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over it.
(Bereshit /Genesis 4:7 JPS)

Our Rabbis concluded that although it would have been better (easier) if God had not created the world but since He did, it is best that humanity watch their ways.

For two-and-a-half years the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel argued. These said: Better for man never to have been created than to have been created.

And these said: Better for man to have been created than not to have been created. They counted and decided: Better for man never to have been created than to have been created. Now that he has been created, he should search through his actions. (Eruvin 13B)

In terms of human tendencies and human nature William Shakespeare was correct.

The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones. (Julius Caesar - Act 3, scene ii)

Humans tend to forget most of the good and remember all of the evil, however God in His infinite mercy and ultimate goodness does not. Evil, though very real is remembered only for three to four generation but the good that is done, The Holy One Of Israel remembers for the sake of the thousands that love Him and for the sake of those who continually desire to keep His commandments.

“LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth; who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. (Shemot/Exodus 34:6-7)

We do not require Augustinian *prevenient grace*, Calvin’s “*irresistible grace* or ”Thomas Aquinas’ *efficacious in itself grace*”
The grace that is given to us all is G-d’s self-willed self-disclosure

in His revelation of the Torah to the children of Israel and to the world. It is impossible for humans to reach G-d but it is possible for G-d to reach us. The revelatory moment is thus, utilizing an aspect of Karl Barth's dialectical theology, an *impossible possibility*. Throughout the course of human history our impossibility is G-d's possibility. G-d persistently answers yes and no to human kind. The flood in the time of Noah is G-d's NO to humankind but the blessing in which Abraham would bless all the families of the earth (Bereshit/Genesis 12:3) is G-d's YES. The descent into Egyptian bondage was G-d's NO but delivering His chosen children with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm is G-d's YES. The three men Hanania, Mishael and Azaria in the fiery furnace was G-d's NO but the fourth person with them who is *like a son of the gods*) is God's YES. The Atlantic slave trade was G-d's NO however the advent and work of Elder William Saunders Crowdy is G-d's YES. The exile was G-d's NO but the promise of Eliyahu's return is G-d's YES. Every NO is past tense i.e. *was* but G-d's YES is present and ever available for those who reach out in faith. Sin is always G-d's NO and T'shuvah (repentance) is always God's YES. This dialectical '*yes and no*' culminates in the explosive moment of the advent of the Messianic moment or G-d's absolute and total YES.

Do not allow world events to cloud your view of the goal. The teleological goal that was present at the foundation of the world is the Messiah and Messianic age. There may be obstacles to the goal but world events are not really where the action is or where we should be casting our gaze. The real action is occurring in front of our Creator. Across the trench, through the forest, over the mountain is where the Messiah is. How do we get there? We hold onto the coattails of the ancestors. We have to cling to coattails of those who have come and in doing so we persist from one generation to the next. We are not living in 5775 (2015) our lives on the 50-yard line. It is not 1st down and 10 and we are not playing the game of life from the line of scrimmage. Every moment in history it is 4th down and goal and all of our actions are accountable.

The biblical prophets were right. Rambam was right. Our fore parents were correct. The Messiah is a foundational principle for anyone who will call his or herself a believer in the True and Only G-d and His revelation. The Messiah is essential to humanity because the Messiah represents hope and if I give up the Messiah, I have given up hope. Messianic expectation is a foundational principal in that it undergirds all of the others commands of the Torah. Our understanding of the 248 do's and the 365 do nots (the

613 commands in the Torah) are devoid of meaning unless the hope intrinsic in Moschiah supports them. Moschiah impacts the very core of our being therefore any theological study and any systematic theological treatise should never treat eschatology as if it is an appendix that is discussed after everything else of importance is reviewed. All of theology, all systematic theology, all G-d talk revolves around Moschiah and our human understanding of G-d, humanity, G-d's gathered community and the chosen children of Israel. Any G-d talk is incomprehensible without eschatology being at the core. Eschatology must undergird theology and every thing else should flow out from eschatology like spokes on a wheel. The Messianic vision affords us a glimpse of the final winning score, the end goal, and a complete picture of the consummation of history. Without it our lives become devoid of meaning, trapped in a philosophical nightmare and an existential dilemma.

Moschiah is a spiritual revolution that will over take the world. It will be a time when the true spirit of G-d will invade and permeate the world. The entire world will be aware of the presence of God. As the prophet Yeshayahu said, "The earth will be filled with the spirit of G-d as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9). When that day arrives all flesh will see His presence. Just as

we now see a table or we see a chair, one day we will see with the spiritual eye the presence of the Spirit of G-d. The time of Moschiah will be a time when we will be at one with God. On that day He will be one and His name will be one (Zechariah 14:9).

Hear O Israel, The Lord Our God The Lord is One.

Thanks to that illustrious time traveler, this Yom Kippur 5776 when I and the congregation of Israel recite together Ashamnu, it is my hope that one thing will not be true. This year when I utter Ta'inu (we have gone astray) I will not have gone astray, at least in regards to the Messiah.

I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the mashiach, and though he may tarry, still I await him every day.

L'Shanah Tovah

May You Have An Easy Fast



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