

# On Redemption Now

Rosh HaShanah Day 1 – 5775 (2014)  
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In his book about the Lubavitcher rebbe, R. Joseph Telushkin shares the following story:

“More than five decades ago, in the early years of his leadership, the [Lubavitcher] Rebbe zt”l visited Chabad’s Camp Gan Israel in the Catskills. A few days later, [Rav] Aaron Soloveitchik came to visit his son who was a camper there and asked him what the Rebbe had spoken about during his visit. The boy answered that the Rebbe had talked about the importance of belief in the imminent arrival of the Messiah. [Rav] Soloveitchik, one of American Jewry’s great rabbinic scholars, said to his son, “But all religious Jews believe that.” [His] son [then] replied, “But he really means it.”” (Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe*, p. 435)

How seriously do we take the belief in the imminent coming of Mashiach?

Earlier this year a firestorm erupted in the Yeshiva world in Israel after a conversation between three major Rabbis was leaked to the Chareidi media. In the conversation R. Steinman, the head of the Ponovitch Yeshiva, argued with R. Shneider, his beloved Chvrutah (study partner) of many years, as well as with R. Bergman, the son-in-law of R. Shach zt”l about whether waiting for the coming of Mashiach, specifically on a daily basis, is considered one of the thirteen principles of Jewish faith, or whether it is sufficient to believe in Mashiach, without actively anticipating his arrival every day. Throughout the conversation R. Steinman strongly adhered to the position that belief in Mashiach does not require daily anticipation.

In the exchange, both Rav Shneider and Rav Bergman are astounded by Rav Steinman’s theological stance. They say to him, and I quote: “But the Rambam already wrote that we are required to wait, to actively wait, not just to believe!” In another instance they say to him, “The Rambam wrote that one who does not wait is a heretic, denying the Torah and the prophesy of Moses.” Rav Steinman however holds firmly to his belief and repeatedly responds: “Nobody fulfills this!” In Yidish it sounds even better:

הגראי”ל שטיינמן (נכנס בדבריו): קיינער איז דאס נישט מקיים! (אף אחד לא מקיים את זה!)

Rav Steinman finally explains that in his view actively waiting for the Messaiah every day is a decree that the community cannot withstand, a decree that the community can never fulfill:

הגראי"ל שטיינמן (שוב זועק): אף אחד אינו מקיים את זה! גזירה שאין הציבור יכולין לעמוד בה! גם כאן זה כך, מי מקיים את זה? מי? מי? אומרים שהחפץ חיים היה מקיים את זה, כך אומרים... אולי כן? איני יודע? כך אומרים, אולי כן? אבל גם הוא עדיין אחד בעולם, אחד בעולם. והאם התורה ניתנה רק לאדם אחד?

"Tell me," he says, "whoever fulfilled this?! They say that the Chfetz Chaim fulfilled this, that's what they say...maybe? I don't know? That's what they say, maybe so! But he is still one of a kind, singular in this world. Was the Torah given to one person alone?"

Rav Bergamn reacts with impatience this time:

הגרמ"צ ברגמן (זועק): אבל זה מהי"ג עיקרים?!!!! י"ג עיקרים!!!!!! בימים מקדם אני חושב שיותר חיכו מהיום.  
"But this is one of the 13 principles of faith!?!!" he says angrily. In a more conciliatory tone he then says, "In the old days, I think they waited for Mashiach more than now a days."

Rav Steinman finally says, and this time also in a conciliatory tone:

הגראי"ל שטיינמן: אמת, בגלל שהם היו שבורים ולכן הם חשבו...  
"True, because they were a little bit more broken...[so they waited more.]"

This may surprise some of you but I would like to insist upon Maimonides' 12<sup>th</sup> principle of faith and respectfully disagree with Rav Steinman's more lenient approach.

I believe that this is the call of the times we are living in and it is also the call of our tradition.

This Rosh HaShannah, it has become incumbent upon each and every one of us to believe in the coming of Mashiach just a little bit more and to actively await the arrival of redemption each and every day.

This is the call of the times we are living in.

For a moment consider events of the past year in general and events from this past summer in particular. Rav Steinman argues that in the past Jews were a little bit more broken than in our days so they waited for the coming of Mashiach just a little bit more. Sadly, I think we are quite broken as it is.

In October 2013, shortly after the High Holidays last year, the pew report was released. Many have tried and will continue to try to spin the report this or that way. Ultimately however the numbers speak for themselves. Affiliation among American Jewry is down and assimilation is up. Identification with the Torah, with Mitzvot, with Jewish communal life, and with Israel is down with 22% of Jews seeing themselves as “Jews of no religion.” According to the study, 73% of American Jews believe that remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them while only 28% deem participation in a Jewish community as an essential component. Still, only 19% believe that observing Jewish law is essential and only 14% believe that observing *kashrut* bears significance to Jewish identity. The Shoah is certainly a critical turning point in the history of our people. But, as an indicator of Jewish identity, remembrance of the Holocaust remains a passive form of affiliation and identification, as opposed to participation in community life or active observance of Torah and Mitzvot.

Many would argue that Jewish Day Schools and Jewish camps were the silver lining of the report. And in many ways they were. Children who attend Jewish Day Schools and Jewish summer camps consistently exhibit positive identification with the Jewish community and maintain a thicker commitment to Jewish continuity in the long run. Still, even on this front, it seems like we are on a brink of a crisis as well. To put it bluntly, our Jewish educational system, both formal and informal, is not financially sustainable. Over the past 20 years the costs of Jewish education have gone up significantly and tuition rates have gone up as well. In the East Bay alone, close to 80% of all Day School students are on financial scholarships of some sort. In other words, even if we found the elixir, we simply can't afford it.

Jewish life in the Diaspora is in need of Mashiach now.

Sadly, Israel is facing challenges of her own.

Over the summer we witnessed the cruel murder of three Israeli teens by Palestinian terrorists followed by the brutal murder of a Palestinian teen perpetrated by Jewish extremists, including two minors. The weeks that followed were equally devastating. Thousands of rockets were fired randomly at Israeli towns covering over 86% of Israel. Though Israeli society showed the same resilience, courage, and morale it has shown throughout her history, the confidence of

Israeli civilians living in the South of Israel was badly shaken by the discovery of underground tunnels and the defense vulnerability to attacks of short range rockets. 8 Israeli civilians died and 64 soldiers were killed in battle. Our community was also outraged by the cynical use of civilians by the Hamas leadership and deeply saddened by the heavy civilian death toll in Gaza. Politically, the hard Right had to learn that military power has its limits, while the hard Left had to reassess its dreams for peace now.

Israel is clearly in need of Mashiach now.

Late in the summer, the world was horrified by repeated images of public executions and beheadings by Islamist fanatics. Civil war and social unrest continued to threaten the stability of the Middle East as well as Eastern Europe. The summer also provided disturbing reportings of increased anti-Semitic incidents throughout Europe as well as hate crimes in United States. The political and social challenges faced by the entire world are also confounded by the continuing climate crisis, a crisis we in California have become too familiar with through the ongoing drought.

The world is in need of Mashiach now.

This is not only the call of the times we are living in. I believe that this is also the call of our tradition.

During the Shofrot section in the Rosh Hashanah Mussaf, we quote verses from our Prophetic writings which describe the blast of the shofar as the sound we will hear during the time of our redemption.

For example, the prophet Isaiah declares, "On that day [meaning, Messianic times] a great shofar will be sounded, and those who are lost will come from the land of Assyria, and those who were banished, from the land of Egypt, and they will worship the Lord at the holy mountain in Jerusalem." (Isaiah 27) Similarly, the prophet Zechariah declares that in Messianic times, "The Lord will appear to them, His arrow will come out like lightning, and the Lord God will sound the shofar, and will move in stormwinds of the south. The Lord of hosts will protect them."

In both these instances, and several other as well, the sounding of the shofar is meant to arouse our faith in the coming of Mashiach, in the possibility of redeeming and mending this world.

In truth, while we only hear the shofar on Rosh Hashana, as well as at the end of Yom Kippur, we actually pray for the sounding of the shofar three times, each and every day. Indeed, our daily *Amidah* prayer contains the following request, “Sound the great shofar for our freedom, raise high the banner to gather our exiles, and gather us together from the four quarters of the earth.” In addition, each Jew pleads three times a day in the *Amida* [prayer] that we “hope for Your salvation [or redemption] the entire day [*ki-li-y’shuatcha kivinu kol ha-yom*].”

Three times a day we plead to God to sound the shofar of our redemption. Three times a day we remind ourselves of our messianic aspirations for ourselves and for the world.

On April 11, 1991, only a year before a devastating stroke that completely altered his life, the Lubavitcher Rebbe zt”l startled his Hassidim, his cherished followers, with the following words, “What more can I do to motivate the entire Jewish people to cry out and demand that Moshiach should come? All that has been done until now has not helped. We are still in exile . . . I have done everything I can. From now on you must do whatever you can. Now, all of you must do all you can to actually bring Moshiach here and now, immediately.” (Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe*, p. 425)

How many people can we point to who can utter such words? How many of us dare say that we have done all we can to bring the Messianic era to fruition, to mend the world from its present state and condition?

About ten years ago I visited my dear cousin in Jerusalem. She is the mother of 6 beautiful children and she is deeply religious, pietistic, and devout. During my visit, she showed me a small sign she hung on the window right by the kitchen table. Its words can only be read by those sitting inside the house. The sign stated, “Prepare for the coming of Mashiach” (“*Hikonu L’Biaat HaMashiach*”). My cousin explained that once a day she sits by that sign and looks out the window. At least once a day, she tries to wait for Mashiach.

I too want to wait for the Messiah daily, but my vision of his arrival is slightly different than that of my beloved cousin.

Franz Kafka once described the coming of the Messiah in the following way, “The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last.”

Our tradition doesn't ask us to passively wait for the coming of Messiah. Instead, it challenges us to make the coming of Messiah inevitable. In other words, we should not wait for the Messianic era, we must force this time to arrive.

Here is the question – and I believe this is the central question of the times we are living in, as well as a central question of our tradition:

How would we live our life differently if we truly believed Mashiach could arrive today?

How would we live our life differently if we truly believed that the onus of his arrival rested on our shoulders and depended on our actions and deeds?

For a moment, consider the following four relationships – your relationship with your family, your relationship with your people and community, your relationship with the world, and your relationship with God.

How would we treat our family members any differently if we truly believed Mashiach could arrive today? In other words, what in our familial relations or our family's dynamic is holding back the arrival of Messiah?

How would we prioritize the needs of members of our community, the needs of the Jewish people writ large, and or the needs of Israel and her people if we truly believed Mashiach could arrive today? In other words, what is currently lacking in my attitude, disposition, and or actions towards the people Israel that is preventing the coming of Messiah now?

Similarly how would our political and social involvements shift visa vie the entire world if we truly believed Mashiach could arrive today? In other words, in what ways has my growing apathy towards world events thwarted the coming of Messiah?

Finally, how might we intensify our observance of the mitzvot and deepen our connection with God if we truly believed Mashiach could arrive today? Or in other words, in what ways have I fallen short in my own performance of mitzvot to the degree that it has prevented the possibility of the coming of Messiah?

In the middle of the summer and in the midst of the war in Gaza, Israel appointed Reuven Rivlin as its new president. During his inauguration, the new president, whose family has resided in Jerusalem since 1809, shared the story of his family's arrival to Israel many generations ago.

President Rivlin's ancestors were among the leading students of the Vilna Gaon, also known as the Gra. The Vilna Gaon, who was a true genius and a lover of math, believed, based on calculations, that the coming of Messiah was imminent. So convinced was the great master that he ordered his followers to make Aliyah, to go to Israel in preparation for the arrival of Messiah.

In his speech, President Rivlin mentioned that according to family legend his ancestors wore shoes the entire way to Israel, even as they slept at night. If the arrival of Messiah is so imminent, you better be wearing shoes at all times...you better be ready for it...even at night.

As we know Messiah was late to come. Sadly, Messiah has not yet arrived.

Friends, it is high time for us to put our shoes on. It is time for us to make Mashiach come now.

This Rosh Hashana, as we hear the blast of the shofar, let us recommit to the prophetic vision, the pietistic prayer, and the activist's dream of bringing Mashiach now.

This Rosh Hashana, as we hear the blast of the shofar, let us redeem our relationships with our loved ones, let us transform our connection to our people and Israel, let us mend the world through our actions, let us deepen our connection to God through the performance of mitzvot.

“The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last.”

May that day be every day of our life. May we make that day now.