

Israel as “The First Flowering of Our Redemption”

Belief, Hope, or Heresy?

I. THE PROBLEM

1. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, *Am ke-Lavi*, II, pp. 192–194 (1983)

The messianic process is a concrete, divine reality, the action upon history of a powerful Redeemer, the Rock of Israel, who lives within history. If someone whispers in your ear that he has “not seen the Messiah lately, either in the fields of the Golan or in the expanses of the Sinai,” he may be an honest man. ... But if he goes a step further and says, “Since I have not seen it, it does not exist,” his words are ones of falsehood and seduction. Say to him, “You may not have seen it, but others have.” ... We declare the absolute certainty of our imminent redemption. ... All the troubles, delays, and complications we have endured are merely momentary and cannot obscure this mighty overall trend, this Messiah, whose power has been concealed since ancient times in the treasure house of history and who is now being revealed in actuality.

2. Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel

2. תפילה לשלום המדינה

Our Father in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of Israel, bless the State of Israel, the first flowering of redemption.

אֲבִינוּ שֶׁבְּשָׁמַיִם, צוּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגוֹאֲלוֹ, בְּרַךְ אֶת מְדִינַת יִשְׂרָאֵל, רֵאשִׁית צְמִיחַת גְּאֻלַּתֵּנוּ.

3. Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital* (2011) pp. 69–70

During the early years of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rav Amital often spoke about the establishment of the State of Israel in terms of the messianic redemption. ... Rav Lichtenstein, as a disciple of Rav Soloveitchik, was skeptical of characterizing the state as the “beginning of redemption.” Addressing the messianic atmosphere that prevailed after the Six Day War, he frequently told students – in a somewhat cynical tone – that he had not seen *Mashiah* roaming the streets of Jerusalem. The students had difficulty accepting his position; some of them even engaged in heated debates with him on the issue.

II. IS “FIRST FLOWERING” MESSIANIC?

4. Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalishcer, *Derishat Tziyyon*

4. הרב זבי הירש קלישר, דרישת ציון

The redemption of Israel that we yearn for – do not think that God, Blessed be His name, will cause it to descend from Heaven, saying to His people, “go out,” or that He will send His Messiah right now from Heaven to sound the great *shofar* ... for only step by step will the redemption of Israel come, only little by little will the exaltation of His power flourish.

גאולת ישראל שאנחנו חוכים לה – אל יחשוב החושב כי פתאום ירד השם יתברך שמו משמים ארץ, לאמור לעמו צאו, או ישלח משיחו כרגע מן שמים לתקוע בשופר גדול ... כי אם מעט מעט תבוא גאולת ישראל, לאט לאט תצמיח קרן ישועה ...

5. Responsa Yeshuot Malko, Y.D. §66 (1891)

And there is no doubt that [moving to the Land of Israel] is a great *mitzvah* for the ingathering is the beginning of the redemption.

5. שו"ת ישועות מלכו חלק יורה דעה סימן ס"ו
ואין ספק שהיא מצוה גדולה כי הקיבוץ הוא אתחלתא
דגאולה.

6. Collected Letters of Rav Kook, Letter 546 (1913)

And there is no doubt that this great movement [Zionism] is the beginning of redemption, may it come speedily in our days, amen, and we are obligated to strengthen its people and its Godly cities with any possible effort.

6. אגרות הראיה, תקמ"ו
ואין ספק שהתנועה הגדולה הזאת היא אתחלתא
דגאולה שתבא בכ"א [במהרה בימינו אמן], ואנו
חייבים להתחזק בעד עמנו ובעד ערי אלקינו בכל
האומץ האפשרי ...

7. Letter from R. Herzog to R. S. Z. Shragai

Blessed be He that we have reached this stage, even though it is still only the beginning of the redemption, and perhaps only the beginning of the beginning.

7. הרב יצחק אייזיק הלבי הרצוג
וברוך הוא שהגענו לשלב זה אף על פי שעדיין אינו
אלא אתחלתא דגאולה, ואולי רק אתחלתא
דאתחלתא.

III. WHO AUTHORED THE PHRASE?

8. R. Yitzhak Isaac Herzog, *Ha-Darom* I, 3 (5717)

Thank God, we have merited that in the State of Israel, which is, as I referred to her in the text of the prayer that I established, "the first flowering of our redemption," there is a flowering of the law of our holy Torah.

9. *Toldotav u-Mifalo ha-Sifrutim shel Maran ha-Rav Ben-Tzion Uziel* (Jerusalem 5739) 18–19

...until he merited to see the establishment of the State of Israel, which he viewed as the "first flowering of the redemption," an original phrase that he composed as part of the prayer that he wrote with the warmth of his heart and the fire of his love for Zion... That is the *Tefillah le-Shalom ha-Medinah*.

10. Letter from R. Yaakov Goldman (secretary to R. Herzog) to Emunah Yaron, (S.Y. Agnon's daughter) (5735)

To the best of my recollection, your father did not change much [of R. Herzog's text], but only shortened and improved the language here and there, and he added the phrase "the first flowering of our redemption."

IV. WHAT IS LOST?

11. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, “What is the Meaning of *Reishit Tsemihat Ge’ullatenu*?” *Tradition* 39:3 (2006)

I can testify concerning myself that I recited the blessing of “*she-Hebeyanu*” and I danced on November 29, 1947 at Be’erot Yitshak, even though the UN had partitioned the land, and likewise in 1948. Our feeling was one of elation; it was as though there was an intoxicating drug in the air—Israeli independence. We weren’t rejoicing because of what Ramban taught [that it is a *mitzvah* to conquer the entire land], but rather because of the fulfillment of Herzl’s vision. At that time, R. Tsevi Yehuda recounted, “I could not go out and participate in the festivities . . . for indeed, God’s word—‘They have divided My land’ (Joel 4:2)—was being fulfilled. . . . In that condition—my whole body shaken, wounded all over, cut up into pieces—I could not rejoice.” We—the simple Jews among whom I regard myself—didn’t know about Ramban. We knew that there was Israeli independence, Jewish sovereignty in our land—and we rejoiced over that.

...

A second approach [to challenges facing the State of Israel], whose proponents included religious people with a zealous vision of greater *erets Yisra’el*, claimed that the solution would be found with the coming of the *Mashi’ah*, and since the *Mashi’ah* is already knocking at the door, there is no need to worry about the pragmatic, actual ramifications of our actions. This messianic thinking—which perceived the *Mashi’ah* as already lurking somewhere in the Jerusalem mountains, soon to be revealed to us—is what led to this view.

To my sorrow, I have not merited divine inspiration. I have never met a prophet who fit all of Rambam’s identifying criteria who told me that the *Mashi’ah* is already on the way. When I established Yeshivat Har Etzion, the architect who designed the *bet midrash* planned it without windows. I told her about the *tsaddik* in whose town a *shofar* blast was once heard, and the whole community thought that the *Mashi’ah* had arrived. The *tsaddik* poked his nose out of the window, sniffed gently, and said, “No. When the *Mashi’ah* comes, it will be possible to sense it in the air.” A *bet midrash* needs windows in order to be able to sense when the *Mashi’ah* is coming. If I haven’t yet sensed the *Mashi’ah*’s footsteps, it is a sign that the *Mashi’ah* hasn’t yet come.