

Fundamental Questions of Jewish Theology: What does it mean to “yearn for *mashiah*”?

Part II – The Madness of Maimonides’ Messianism

I. RAMBAM’S MASHIAH

1. *Siddur (Nusah Ashkenaz)*

I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah and even though he may tarry, nevertheless, I yearn every day for his coming.

2. Rambam, *M.T. Laws of Kings 11:1*

In the future, the Messianic king will arise and renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty. He will build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. Then, in his days, the observance of all the statutes will return to their previous state. We will offer sacrifices, observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years according to all their particulars as described by the Torah. Anyone who does not believe in him or does not await his coming, denies not only the statements of the other prophets, but those of the Torah and Moses, our teacher.

3. Rambam, *M.T. Laws of Kings 11:3*

One should not presume that the Messianic king must work miracles and wonders, bring about new phenomena in the world, resurrect the dead, or perform other similar deeds. This is definitely not true. ... The main thrust of the matter is thus: This Torah, its statutes, and its laws, are everlasting. We may not add to them or detract from them.

1. סידור (נוסח אשכנז)

אָנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה בְּבִיאַת הַמְּשִׁיחַ וְאֵף עַל פִּי שְׂוִיתֵמְהֶמָּה עִם כָּל זֶה אֲחַכֶּה לוֹ בְּכָל יוֹם שְׂיָבוֹא:

2. רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים פרק י"א הלכה א'

הַמְּלִיךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ עֲתִיד לְעֹמֵד וּלְהַחְזִיר מַלְכוּת דָּוִד לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. לְמַמְשְׁלָה הָרִאשׁוֹנָה. וּבִנְיַן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וּמִקְבֵּץ גְּדוּחֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְחֻזְרוֹת כָּל הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים בְּיָמָיו כְּשֶׁהָיוּ מִקֶּדֶם. מִקְרִיבֵין קִרְבָּנוֹת. וְעוֹשִׂין שְׂמִטִּין וְיִוִּבְלוֹת כְּכֹל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמִוּרָה בַּתּוֹרָה. וְכָל מִי שְׂאִינוּ מֵאֲמִין בּוֹ. אִם מִי שְׂאִינוּ מִחֻכָּה לְבִיאָתוֹ. לֹא בְּשֵׁאֵר נְבִיאִים בְּלִבְד הוּא כּוֹפֵר. אֶלֶּא בַּתּוֹרָה וּבַמִּשְׁנָה רַבְּנָנוּ. ...

3. רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים פרק י"א הלכה ג'

וְאֵל יַעֲלֶה עַל דַּעְתְּךָ שֶׁהַמְּלִיךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ צָרִיךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתוֹת וּמוֹפְתִים וּמַחְדֵּשׁ דְּבָרִים בְּעוֹלָם אִם מַחְיָה מֵתִים וְכוּיָצֵא בְּדָבָרִים אֵלּוּ – אִין הַדְּבָר כָּד. ... וְעַקֵּר הַדְּבָרִים כְּכֹה הֵן – שֶׁהַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת חֻקֶּיהָ וּמִשְׁפָּטֶיהָ לְעוֹלָם וְלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים. וְאִין מוֹסִיפִין עֲלֶיהֶן וְלֹא גוֹרְעִין מֵהֶן:

4. Rambam, *M.T. Laws of Kings* 12:2

All these and similar matters cannot be definitely known by man until they occur. For these matters are undefined in the prophets' words. And even the wise men have no established tradition regarding these matters except their own interpretation of the verses. Therefore, there is a controversy among them regarding these matters.

... Similarly, one should not try to determine the appointed time for *Mashiah's* coming. Our Sages declared: "May the spirits of those who attempt to determine the time of *Mashiah's* coming expire!" (*Sanh.* 97b) Rather, one should await and believe in the general conception of the matter as explained.

5. Rambam, *M.T. Laws of Kings* 12:1

Do not presume that in the Messianic age any facet of the world's nature will change, or there will be innovations in the work of creation. Rather, the world will continue according to its pattern.

Although Isaiah states: "The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat" (11:6), these words are a metaphor and a parable. The interpretation of the prophecy is as follows: Israel will dwell securely together with the wicked gentiles who are likened to a wolf and a leopard. Thus it is written in Jeremiah: "A wolf from the wilderness shall spoil them and a leopard will stalk their cities" (5:6). They will all return to the true faith and no longer steal or destroy. Rather, they will eat permitted food at peace with Israel as Isaiah states: "The lion will eat straw like an ox" (11:7).

Similarly, other Messianic prophecies of this nature are metaphors. In the Messianic era, everyone will realize which matters were implied by these metaphors and which allusions they contained.

4. רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים פרק י"ב הלכה ב'

וְכָל אֵלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן לֹא יָדַע אָדָם אִיךָ יִהְיוּ עַד שְׁיֵהיוּ. שְׁדָבָרִים סְתוּמִין הֵן אֲצֵל הַנְּבִיאִים. גַּם הַחֲכָמִים אֵין לָהֶם קְבֻלָּה בְּדָבָרִים אֵלֹהֵי אֵלָּא לְפִי הַכְרַע הַפְּסוּקִים. וְלְפִיכָךְ יֵשׁ לָהֶם מַחְלָקֶת בְּדָבָרִים אֵלֹהֵי.

... וְכֵן לֹא יִחְשַׁב הַקָּצִין. אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים, תַּפַּח רוּחַם שֶׁל מַחְשְׁבֵי הַקָּצִים. אֵלָּא יַחְכְּהוּ וַיֵּאֱמִין בְּכֻלּוֹ הַדְּבָר כְּמוֹ שֶׁבְּאֵרְנוּ:

5. רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים פרק י"ב הלכה א'

אֵל יַעֲלֶה עַל הַלֵּב שְׁבִימוֹת הַמְּשִׁיחַ יִבְטַל דְּבָר מִמְּנִהְגוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, אוֹ יִהְיֶה שֶׁם חֲדוּשׁ בְּמַעֲשֵׂה בְרָאשִׁית. אֵלָּא עוֹלָם כְּמִנְהִגוֹ נוֹהֵג.

וְזֶה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר בִּישְׁעֵיהָ "וְגַר זָאֵב עִם כֶּבֶשׂ וְנֹמֵר עִם גְּדִי יִרְבֵּץ" (ישעיה יא, ו) מְשָׁל וְחִידָה. עֲנִין הַדְּבָר שֶׁיִּהְיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹשְׁבֵינֵינוּ לְבִטָּח עִם רִשְׁעֵי עַבּוּרֵינוּ הַמְּשׁוּלִים כְּזָאֵב וְנֹמֵר. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "זָאֵב עֲרֹבוֹת יִשְׁדָּדֵם וְנֹמֵר שֶׁקָּדַע עַל עַרְיָהֶם" (ירמיה ה, ו). וְיַחְזְרוּ כָּלֵם לְדַת הָאֱמֶת. וְלֹא יִגְזְלוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתוּ. אֵלָּא יֵאָכְלוּ דְּבָר הַמִּתֵּר בְּנַחַת עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְאֵרִיָּה כְּבָקָר יֵאָכֵל תְּבֹן" (ישעיה יא, ז).

וְכֵן כָּל כִּיּוֹצֵא בְּאֵלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים בְּעֲנִין הַמְּשִׁיחַ הֵם מְשָׁלִים. וְבִימוֹת הַמְּלִיךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ יָדַע לְכָל לֹאֵי זֶה דְּבָר הָיָה מְשָׁל. וְמָה עֲנִין רְמִזוֹ בָּהֶן:

II. EXAMPLES AND ISSUES

6. Rashi, *Sukkah 41a, s.v. 'iy nami*

However, concerning the future Temple – which we yearn for being built and completed – it will be revealed and descend from Heaven, as it is written, “The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your Hands established” (Ex. 15:17).

6. רש"י, מסכת סוכה דף מ"א עמוד א ד"ה "אי נמו"

אבל מקדש העתיד – שאנו מצפין בנוי ומשוכלל – הוא יגלה ויבא משמים שנאמר "מקדש ה' כוננו ידיך" (שמות ט"ו:י"ז):

7. Rambam, *The Guide of the Perplexed III, 11* (trans. Shlomo Pines, Vol. II pp. 440–1)

Just as a blind man, because of the absence of sight, does not cease stumbling, being wounded, and also wounding others, because he has nobody to guide him on his way, the various sects of men – every individual according to the extent of his ignorance – does to himself and to others great evils from which individuals of the species suffer. If there were knowledge, whose relation to the human form is like that of the faculty of sight to the eye, they would refrain from doing any harm to themselves and to others. For through cognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished. It holds out this promise, saying: “And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb. ...”

8. Abraham Halkin, *Introduction to Iggeret Teiman* (quoted in *David Shatz, "The Muted Messiah" p. 280*)

It is as if Maimonides were to say, “I believe in the messianic days because I have been commanded to do so by the Torah and tradition.”

3. Rambam, *M.T. Laws of Kings 11:3*

Proof can be brought from the fact that Rabbi Akiva, one of the greater Sages of the Mishnah, was one of the supporters of King Bar Kozibah and would describe him as the Messianic king. He and all the Sages of his generation considered him to be the Messianic king until he was killed because of sins. Once he was killed, they realized that he was not the Mashiah. The Sages did not ask him for any signs or wonders.

9. רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים פרק י"א הלכה ג'

שְׁהָרִי רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא חָכֵם גְּדוֹל מְחַכְמֵי מְשֻׁנָּה הָיָה. וְהוּא הָיָה נוֹשֵׂא כְּלָיו שֶׁל בֶּן כּוּזִיבָא הַמְּלִךְ. וְהוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר עָלָיו שֶׁהוּא הַמְּלִךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ. וְדָמָה הוּא וְכָל חַכְמֵי דוֹרוֹ שֶׁהוּא הַמְּלִךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ. עַד שֶׁנֶּהְרַג בְּעוֹנוֹת. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁנֶּהְרַג נוֹדַע לְהֵם שֶׁאֵינּוּ. וְלֹא שָׁאֲלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ חַכְמִים לֹא אוֹת וְלֹא מוֹפֵת.

10. *Sanhedrin 93b*

Bar Koziba ruled for two and a half years. He said to the Sages, I am *mashiah*. They said to themselves, with regard to *mashiah* it is written that he can smell and judge. Let us see if he can smell and judge. When they saw that he was unable to smell and judge they executed him.

10. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צ"ג עמוד ב'

בר כוזיבא מלך תרתין שנין ופלגא. אמר להו לרבנן – אנא משיח. אמרו ליה – במשיח כתיב דמורח ודאין. נחזי אנן אי מורח ודאין. כיון דחזוהו דלא מורח ודאין קטלוהו.

11. Yerushalmi, Ta'anit 4:5 [68d]

Rebbi Simeon ben Yohai stated: Akiva my teacher used to preach, "there appeared a star out of Jacob," there appeared Koziba out of Jacob. When Rebbi Akiva saw Bar Koziba he said, this is the King Messiah! Rebbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said to him, Akiva! Grass will grow from your jaws and still David's son will not have come!

11. תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת תענית פרק ד' הלכה ה'

תני רבי שמעון בן יוחי – עקיבה רבי היה דורש דרדך כוכב
מיעקב – דרדך כוזבא מיעקב. רבי עקיבה כד הוה חמי בר
כוזבה, הוה אומר – דין הוא מלכא משיחא! אומר ליה רבי
יוחנן בר תורתא – עקיבה! יעלו עשבים בלחייך ועדיין בן
דוד לא יבא!

III. AN IRONIC CONSEQUENCE

12. Natan of Gaza (Quoted in David Berger, "Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides' Rationalist Approach to the Messianic Era," *The Legacy of Maimonides*)

And though we have found no hint of this matter in the explicit words of the Torah, we have already seen how strange the sages' words are regarding these matters, so that we cannot fully understand anything they say in their context, as the great luminary Maimonides has also testified; their words will be understood only when the events actually unfold.