The Jewish Messiah

We Jews are waiting for the Messiah (Mashiach, מָשִׁיחַ).
- Means “The Anointed One”.
- Kings were anointed with oil when they began their reign.

Many contenders arose over the centuries, but rabbis disqualified them. What exactly are the job requirements? What are we expecting? What will happen after he arrives? Maybe YOU qualify!

Biblical references

Torah:
And Balaam [the Gentile prophet] said to [King] Balak [who told him to curse the Jews]:... [I] heard the words of God, and know the knowledge of the most High, [and] saw the vision of the Almighty...
I shall see him, but not now.
I shall behold him, but he is not near.
A star shall shoot forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.
And it shall strike the corners of Moab, and destroy all the sons of Seth...
And Israel shall do bravely.
A ruler shall come out of Jacob... [Numbers 24:12-19]

Note:
A star shall shoot forth out of Jacob. [Numbers 24:17]

Isaiah:
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government is upon his shoulder. His name shall be “Wonderful Counselor of the Mighty God, of the Everlasting Father, of the Prince of Peace”. [His mission shall be] to increase government, establish unending peace upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom, and uphold it through justice and righteousness from that time forth and forevermore. [Isaiah 9:5-6]

And there shall come forth a rod from the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow from his roots; and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord... And he shall not judge by
what his eyes see, nor decide by what his ears hear, but he shall judge with righteousness... and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked...
And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together
And a little child shall lead them.
And the cow and the bear shall feed.
Their young ones shall lie down together.
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp.
And the weaned child shall put his hand in the vipers’ den.
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.
-And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse... To which the nations shall seek... And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again, the second time, to recover the remnant of his people... and He shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth... Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim. [Isaiah 11:1-13]

Qualifications

From the above, we conclude that the Messiah:

1. Will be a human being. (“For a child is born to us -- ki yeled yullad lanu.”)
2. Will be a Jew descended from King David. (“A rod from the stem of Jesse -- choter migeza’ Yishai.”)
3. Will deliver Israel from its enemies. (“He shall strike the corners of Moab”, “with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked”).
4. Will lead the exiles back into the Land of Israel. (“And in that day... the Lord shall... gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.”)
5. Will rule and judge fairly. (“With righteousness shall he judge”.)
6. Will bring universal peace. (“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb -- vegar ze-ev ’im keves venamer ’im gedi.”) People will stop bickering and envying one another. [“Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.”]
7. God will be recognized by all mankind. (“The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord -- mal’a haaretz de’ah et HaShem.”)
The Temple will also be rebuilt (it was standing in the days of Isaiah), but sacrifices and prayers will be limited to thanksgiving, because no need sin or guilt offerings, or petitionary prayers. Midrash:

Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Menahem of Gallia: “In the Time to Come all sacrifices will be abolished, except for the thanksgiving offering, and all prayers will be annulled, except those for Thanksgiving.” [Leviticus R. 9:7]

Observations

A divine being who sacrifices himself to atone for our sins is not a Jewish concept.

King Cyrus of Persia, who allowed Israel to return from Babylonian captivity and rebuild the Temple, is also referred to as “mashiach”:

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus [le-meshicho, le-Khoresh] … [Isaiah 45:1]

In Amidah (recited three times a day), we pray for all messianic parts:

- Ingathering of exiles Blessing 10
- Restoration of justice Blessing 11
- End of enemy oppression Blessing 12
- Reward to the righteous Blessing 13
- Rebuilding of Jerusalem Blessing 14
- Coming of Messiah Blessing 15
- Restoration of Temple Blessing 17
- Universal peace Blessing 19

A few Jewish groups (Satmar Hasidim, Neturei Karta) reject State of Israel on grounds that only Messiah will gather exiles.

Many secular Jews view David ben Gurion (1886-1973), founder of the State of Israel, as a secular Jewish Messiah, and the state as “reshit tz’michat ge’ullatenu – the beginning of the flowering of our redemption.”

Messiah will have a forerunner in his lifetime. Talmud: “Mashiach ben Yosef -- Messiah son of Joseph” will appear before “Mashiach ben David -- Messiah son of David”), and announce his coming, prepare the ground, and be killed in war. [Sukkah 52a]
The prophet Elijah will return first:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers… [Malachi 4:5–6]

During Havdalah, concluding Shabbat, we sing a song asking for Elijah to come and bring the Messiah with him:

- Eliahu hanavi... Bimhera beyamenu yavo elenu, ’im Mashiach ben David.
- Elijah the Prophet… May he come to us soon, in our day, with the Messiah, the son of David.

In the Birkat HaMazon, the Grace after Meals, we ask for Elijah:

-Harachaman hu yish’lach lanu et Eliyahu Hanavi, zachur latov, Vivasser lanu b’sorot tovot yeshu’ot venechamot.
- May the All-Merciful One send us Elijah the Prophet, may he be remembered for good, and may he announce to us news of goodness, salvation, and comfort.

**Maimonides’ understanding**

The Melech HaMashiach, the Anointed king, is destined to arise and restore the kingdom of David to its glory of old, to its original sovereignty. He will build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. In his times, all the laws of the Torah will be reinstated as before... as outlined in the Torah.

Whoever does not believe in him or does not anticipate his coming, denies not only the other prophets but also the Torah and Moses. For the Torah testifies about him:

God will bring you back from your captivity... He will... gather you from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts have been driven out to the farthest parts of heaven, from there will the Lord your God gather you, and from there will he fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you... [Deuteronomy 30:3-5]

These explicit words of the Torah encapsulate all that has been said (concerning Mashiach) by the prophets.

Also, it is spoken of [in the Torah] in the story of Balaam, and there it is prophesied on the two “anointed ones”. The first Mashiach, which is David, who saved Israel from its enemies; and the last Mashiach, who shall be one of his descendents, who will save Israel in the end [of the Exile]. There he says:
I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but he is not near.
There shall shoot forth a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall strike the corners of Moab, and rule over all the children of Seth. [Numbers 24:17]

[He now explains why Balaam made duplicate statements each time:]
“I shall see him, but not now”--this is David;
“I shall behold him, but he is not near”--this is the King Mashiach;
“There shall shoot forth a star out of Jacob”--this is David;
“And a scepter shall rise out of Israel”--this is the King Mashiach;
“And shall strike the corners of Moab”--this is David...
“And rule over all the children of Seth”--this is the King Mashiach...

As for the books of the prophets, there is no need to cite references [to Mashiach], as they are full of them...

[He now explains how to recognize the Messiah:]
If there arises a king from the house of David, who studies the Torah and fulfills its precepts... who will prevail upon all of Israel to follow it and repair its breaches, and will wage the battle of God, he is presumed to be Mashiach. If he did so and was successful, and he built the Holy Temple on its site and gathered the dispersed of Israel, he is certainly Mashiach. He will correct the entire world to serve God together, as is written:
For then I will convert the nations to a clear language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him as one. [Tzephaniah 3:9]

[He now explains the true purpose of the Messiah concept:]
The sages and the prophets did not crave the era of Mashiach in order to rule over the world... or to eat, drink and rejoice; but only so that they be free for Torah and its wisdom and be rid of any oppressor and disrupter...

And at that time there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry. For the good will be plentiful, and all delicacies available as dust. The entire occupation of the world will be only to know God... Israel will be of great wisdom; they will perceive the esoteric truths and comprehend their Creator's wisdom as is the capacity of man. As it is written:
For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea... [Isaiah 11:9]
[Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11-12]

A Principle of Faith

One of Rambam's thirteen principles of faith is to believe in the coming of the Messiah:
Ani ma'amin be-emuna shelema, beviat ha-mashiach
Veaf al pi sheyit-mahmeha im kol zeh,
Achake loh bechol yom she-yavo

I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah
And, even though he may tarry, still will I wait for him

Well-known melody was written during the Holocaust, composer unknown. Reb Azriel David Fastag sang it on a train to Treblinka. A fellow captive escaped and taught the tune to the Modzitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar. On Yom Kippur the Modzitzer Rebbe sang it. The congregation burst into tears. The tune spread throughout world Jewry like wildfire. The Modzitzer Rebbe said, “With this niggun, the Jewish people went to the gas chambers. And with this niggun, the Jews will march to greet Mashiach.”

Reform believe in a “Messianic Age”, not a Messiah. So changed “Avot” in Amidah from

\[ Umevi goel livnei vnehem \] will bring a redeemer to his children’s children

to

\[ Umevi geulla livnei vnehem \] will bring redemption to his children's children.

When will the Messiah come?

Our conduct will determine when the Messiah will come. In general, at a time when he is most needed, or at a time when he is most deserved. Suggestions: The Messiah will come:

When Israel repents [Talmud]

Rav said: All the predestined dates [for the arrival of the Messiah] have passed, and [so] the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds...
Rabbi Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed.
Rabbi Yehoshua said to him, if they do not repent… the Holy One, blessed be He, will set up a king over them, whose decrees shall be as
cruel as Haman’s, whereby Israel shall engage in repentance, and he will thus bring them back to the right path. [Sanhedrin 97b]

When Israel observes two Shabbatot in a row properly [Talmud]: Rav Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochai: If Israel were to keep two Shabbatot according to the laws [of Shabbat], they would be redeemed immediately. [Shabbat 118b]

When Israel observes one Shabbat properly [Midrash, Talmud Y]: Rabbi Levi said: If Israel kept Shabbat properly even for one day, the son of David would come…
Rabbi Yochanan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, told Israel: Although I have set a definite term for the millennium which will come at the appointed time whether Israel returns to Me in penitence or not, still, if they repent even for one day, I will bring it before its appointed time… Just as we find that the son of David will come as a reward for the observance of all commandments, so also will he come for the observance of Shabbat, because Shabbat is equivalent to all commandments.
Rabbi Eleazar bar Abina said: In the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, we find it stated that Shabbat is equivalent to all commandments:
- In the Torah, because when Moses forgot to tell them the commandment of Shabbat, God said to him: “How long will you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?” [Ex. 16:28] And immediately after this it says, “See that the Lord has given you Shabbat” [Ex. 16:29].
- In the Prophets, for it says, “But the House of Israel… did not walk in My statutes”; and immediately afterwards it says, “And they greatly profaned My sabbaths”. [Ezekiel 20:13].
- In the Writings, because it says, “You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven” [Neh. 9:13], and immediately afterwards it says, “and made known to them Your holy Shabbat.” God said: “If you observe Shabbat virtuously, I will regard it as if you observed all the commandments of the Torah, but if you profane it, I will regard it as if you had profaned all the commandments.” [Ex. R. 25:12]

Though I have set a limit to “the end [of days],” that it will happen in its time regardless of whether they will repent or not… the son of David (Mashiach) will come if they keep just one Shabbat, because Shabbat is equivalent to all the the mitzvot. [Ta’anit Y 1:10]

Problem: What is “all Israel”? Most halachic Jews today don’t know they are Jewish (conversions way back out of Judaism, etc.)

When Israel is united
When Jacob was on his deathbed, he told his sons:
   Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what will befall you in the
   end of days. Gather yourselves together, and hear… [Gen. 49:1-2]

This is interpreted to mean:
   Though it is not known when the Day of Judgment will be, I tell you that
   the hour you gather and assemble together, you shall be redeemed.
   [Aggadat Bereishit 82]

God likes Jewish unity. Midrash:
   [In Ex. 19:2], it says: "And Israel encamped there." [It does not say:] "the
   children of Israel", [but "Israel"], meaning they were united. [Upon seeing
   this,] the Holy One Blessed Be He said: "This is the time I will give the
   Torah to My children!" [Lev. R. 9:9]

When the Jews are in trouble

Talmud:
   Rabbi Yochanan said: When you see a generation ever dwindling, hope
   for [the Messiah]… When you see a generation overwhelmed by many
   troubles as by a river, wait for [the Messiah]. [Sanhedrin 98a]

When the current generation is totally wicked

19th-century Hassidic master Rabbi Zadok HaKohen of Lublin writes:
   The redemption will emerge precisely from a place of lust and sin, by
   means of repentance (teshuvah). The Talmud says, in Sanhedrin 98a,
   “The son of David [i.e., the Messiah] will come only in a generation that
   is entirely wicked.” David is the archetype for the messianic soul because
   he showed how to make repentance into a life principle… And just that is
   the realization of ultimate fulfillment, that the root of evil will be
   transformed to good… At that time, the lowest will become the highest.
   [Zadok HaKohen of Lublin in Tzidkat Ha-Tzaddik]

But would this not encourage people to lapse into bad behavior for
the express purpose of bringing the Messiah? It *has* happened
(pseudo-Messiah Jacob Frank and other times).

When the current generation is totally righteous

Did the Talmud really say: “The Messiah will come only in a
generation that is entirely wicked”? No, it actually says:
   Rabbi Yochanan also said: The son of David will come only in a
   generation that is entirely wicked or entirely righteous. [Sanhedrin 98a]
Big difference. Always check original sources. And try to bring the Messiah by good behavior, not bad.

Messiah will come in either on an ass or from heaven, depending on whether we are all-good or all-bad:
- Behold, your King comes to you. He is just, and victorious; humble and riding on an ass... [Zechariah 9:9]
- Behold, someone like a son of man came with the clouds of heaven...
  [Daniel 7:13]

Talmud: The Messiah will be born on Tish’a b’Av. [Ber. Y 2:4]
Some say he was born in the Middle East in 1949. (Tish’a b’Av in 1949 was 4 August. I was born in Egypt on 4 September 1949! Missed! 😊)

Looking for arrival dates

Finding dates for Messiah’s arrival was almost continuous since Middle Ages. Many dates coincided with terrible persecutions of the Jews: The Crusades (1096), the Black Death in Europe (1346), the Expulsion from Spain (1492), Chmielnicki massacres in Poland and Ukraine (1648). All referred to as “the birth pangs of the Messiah” (hevlei Mashiach).

If you see that a man has prophesied the advent of the Messiah, know that he is engaged either in sorcery or in dealings with devils; or that he uses the power of the Divine Name... One must say to such a man: “Do not talk in this manner...” [Sefer Hasidim 212; from 12th-century Germany]

Rabbis never liked the practice of trying to predict the time of the mashiach’s coming, because mistakes cause people to lose faith in the messianic idea, or even in Judaism.

The Messiah’s dubious ancestry

- Lot sleeps with his daughter, has Moab, ancestor of Ruth
- Judah, married to a Canaanite woman, sleeps with daughter-in-law Tamar, disguised as a prostitute, and has Peretz, ancestor of Boaz
- Ruth marries Boaz, has Obed, ancestor of King David
- King David marries Bathsheba, after sending her husband Uriah on a suicide mission, and has Solomon
- Solomon is the ancestor of the future Messiah
So Messiah is product of: incest, marriage with idolaters, going to prostitutes, deception, adultery, and abuse of power bordering on murder. [Why?]

**Messiah Pretenders**

LOTS of pretenders. Most little known or unknown.

Many Jews, especially Hasidim, believe there is someone in each generation who could be Messiah, if the Jews deserve it. (*Tzadik Ha-Dor* -- Tzaddik of the Generation.)

**Judah Maccabee (d. 160 BCE)**

Led successful revolt against Antiochus' Seleucid empire. Many saw him as the Messiah because he freed the Jews from foreign domination and events in his life paralleled prophecies in Daniel 8.

**Jesus of Nazareth (4 BCE - 30 CE)**

His followers believed him to be the Messiah (Christians). Most influential: 2.5 billion in the world today. Belief in him had to be exported from Israel to take root, at hand of Paul. *Toledot Yeshu*, an unflattering Jewish account of the origins of Christianity, claims: Paul was acting on orders of the Sanhedrin, to separate Jesus believers from other Jews, by creating a new religion distinct from Judaism:

The mistaken followers [of Yeshu] among Israel said: “You have slain the Messiah of the Lord.” The Israelites answered: “You have believed in a false prophet.” There was endless strife and discord for thirty years.

The Sages desired to separate from Israel those who continued to claim Yeshu as the Messiah, and they called upon a greatly learned man, Shim’on Kepha, for help. Shim’on went to Antioch, main city of the Nazarenes, and proclaimed to them: “I am the disciple of Yeshu. He has sent me to show you the way. I will give you a sign, as Yeshu has done.” Shim’on, having gained the secret of the Ineffable Name [of God], healed a leper and a lame man by means of it, and thus found acceptance as a true disciple. He told them that Yeshu was in heaven, at the right hand of his Father, in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1:

The Lord said to my lord: Sit at My right hand. [Psalm 110:1]
He added that Yeshu desired that they separate themselves from the
Jews and no longer follow their practices, as Isaiah had said:
    My soul abhors your new moons and your feasts. [Is. 1:14]
They were now to observe
- the first day of the week instead of the seventh [as Shabbat];
- the Resurrection instead of the Passover;
- the Ascension into Heaven instead of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks;
- the finding of the Cross instead of the New Year;
- the Feast of the Circumcision instead of Yom Kippur, the Day of
  Atonement;
- the New Year instead of Hanukkah.
They were to be indifferent with regard to circumcision and the dietary
laws. Also they were to follow the teaching of turning the right [cheek] if
smitten on the left, and the meek acceptance of suffering.
Shim'on Kepha (or Paul, as he was known to the Nazarenes) taught them
all these new ordinances to separate these Nazarenes from the people of
Israel and to bring the internal strife to an end. [Toledot Yeshu]

Makes some sense, but many scholars believe it to be just anti-
Christian polemics. Publication date uncertain, range 3rd-7th century.
Fragments in Aramaic found in Cairo Genizah.
- Avoidance of subject to maintain good relations?
Resurgence of scholarly interest in it (2011 Princeton conference).

Bar Kochba (d. 135)

Leader of 2nd revolt against Rome. Accepted by many:
    When Rabbi Akiva beheld Bar Koziba, he exclaimed, “This is the king
    Messiah!” Rabbi Yochanan bar Torta retorted: “Akiva, grass will grow in
    your cheeks and [the Messiah] will still not have come!” [Lam. R. 2:4]

Moses of Crete (448)

A Jew claiming to be Moses told Cretan Jews he would bring them to
Judea without ships. At a certain date he ordered them to jump in the
sea and many drowned. [Socrates Scholasticus, Historia Ecclesiæ, 12:33].

David Reuben (1490-1541) and Solomon Molcho (1500–1532)

David Reuben said he was brother of King of Khaibar, a town in
Arabia where the tribes of Reuben and Gad were said to dwell; that
he was sent to Europe to secure arms and alliances to fight the
Muslims. He joined with converso/mystic Solomon Molcho, got
excellent reception from Christian authorities (1524) and many Jews
accepted him as the Messiah. Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and king of Spain, forced him to convert to Christianity, then jailed him and burned Molcho at the stake (1532).

**Shabbetai Tzvi (1626-1676)**

Chmielnicki massacres (1648-9, killed 300,000 Jews) led to Messianism, then Hassidism.

Shabbetai Tzvi thought he was the Messiah, spurred by Nathan of Gaza (as “Mashiach ben Yosef”) in 1665. Prominent rabbis accepted him. Millions set out for Jerusalem. Muslim Sultan put a stop to it, forced him to convert to Islam. Many followers (Sabbateans) did same (Donmeh of today), thinking one must sink low before redemption.

Many Sabbateans also claimed to be Messiah after Tzvi’s death:
- Mordecai Mokia (1650-1729)
- Jacob Querido (d. 1690) and his son Berokia (1695-1740)
- Miguel (Abraham) Cardoso (1630-1706), of Marrano heritage
- Löbele Prossnitz (Joseph ben Jacob) (d. 1750)
- Isaiah Hasid

Israel ben Eliezer (Baal Shem Tov, 1698-1760) founded Hasidism in early 17th-century around mysticism, simple faith, joy and fervor in worship, veneration of leadership, distinctive dress; also de-emphasis of study and legalities (later changed).

**Jacob Frank (1726-1791)**

Son of a Sabbatean, claimed to be reincarnation of Tzvi (1757). In 1759 he and followers converted to Christianity. Created new religion, Frankism, mixing Christianity and Judaism. His daughter Eve Frank (1754–1816) was declared to be incarnation of Shechinah (1770), the female aspect of God, as well as the reincarnation of the Virgin Mary, and had her own following.

**The Shukr Kuhayls of Yemen (1860s)**

-Shukr Kuhayl I (d. 1865) was a Yemenite messianic claimant (San‘a’, 1861). Almost all Jews in Yemen believed in him [Jacob Saphir, in Even
Ordered killed by imam’s henchmen, who viewed him as a threat (1865). Followers expected his imminent return. In 1868, Yehudah ben Shalom claimed to be his reincarnation, took name Shukr Kuhayl II, and led a powerful messianic movement, which also attracted Arabs. Hugely popular, then lost followers and died a pauper (1878).

**Menachem Mendel Schneerson, last Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902–1994)**

He often said Messiah’s coming is imminent, urging all to pray and hasten the day with acts of kindness. Many believed he was the one. He never said he was, and rejected claims by others that he was. After his death, some still believed he was the Messiah, but Chabad leaders have muted such Messianic behavior.

Generally, Hassidim frequently believe their Rebbe is the Messiah.

**Maybe the Messiah was born last year?**

News item from “The Jewish Jerusalem”, 8/8/2014

And now for a miracle that took place on Tisha B’Av. Soroka Hospital in Be’er Sheva, Israel, where most of the wounded Israeli soldiers [from the Gaza war with Hamas] were taken, had an unprecedented number of babies born on Tisha B’Av. The usual average is 35 babies. On this Tisha B’Av, however, the number was 68. This broke all records in Israeli history for number of babies born at one hospital. Interestingly, this number equals the total of Israeli soldiers and civilians who have died in the Gaza war. It is curious also because Jewish sages teach us that Mashiach (the Messiah) will be born on Tisha B’Av.

**Two Jewish sayings in conclusion**

Talmud:

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai used to say: “If you are holding a sapling in your hand and someone tells you, “Come quickly, the Messiah is here!” first finish planting the tree, then go greet the Messiah.” [Avot de Rabbi Nathan 2:31, 31b]

Messiah not a priority? Or “Beware of false pretenders”?

Yiddish saying:
When the Messiah comes, all the sick will be healed, but the fools will remain fools.

Az meshiach vet kumen, vellen alleh krankeh oisgehailt verren; nor a nar vet bleiben a nar.