

# Redemption and the Personal Messiah: On Four Passages in Rabbi Soloveitchik

When one asks for R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's thoughts on Messianism, the answer usually turns to his well-known thoughts on Zionism. The Rav is viewed as having formulated a non-Messianic affirmation of the Zionist project. This means, first and foremost, that the secular Zionist endeavor of settling the Land of Israel and establishing a viable Jewish government on its soil is a good thing, independent of the specific halakhic values that motivated religious Jews to live in the land without exercising sovereignty and independent of speculations and hope that the return to the land and the achievement of sovereignty will usher in the end of history and the Messianic age. Zionism can be justified simply in terms of saving Jewish lives, rehabilitating Jewish dignity, and other goals. The Rav sets out these ideas most fully in his *Kol Dodi Dofek*, originally delivered as a lecture in 1956.<sup>1</sup>

As is also well-known, the Rav held that the political disposition of areas in *Eretz Yisrael* should be determined by military considerations, rather than absolute rulings reflecting the halakhic status of these areas. Hence, if peace is likely to be achieved through territorial compromise (as big an "if" then as today!), in the opinion of competent authorities, that opportunity would be worth pursuing. This view is logically independent of Messianic calculations. Nonetheless, the Rav's reluctance to risk lives by relying on supposed divine guarantees is of a piece with his "non-Messianic" Zionism. It is in the spirit of Rambam's warning (*Hilkhot Melakhim*, chapter 12) that engaging in speculation about the eschatological future leads neither to fear of God nor to love of God. To that extent, the Rav thus places himself closer to non-Zionist Haredi opinions (and to the Brisker tradition to which he was heir) and more remote from popular militant strains in religious Zionism.

One may examine theological beliefs in terms of their content alone, where the goal is to clarify what is being taught and whether it is true and

1 For an overview and discussion, see my 2018 "Kol Dodi Dofek: A Primer," *Yom Haatzmaut To-Go 5778* (available at [www.yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org)), and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Symposium in *TRADITION* 39 (Fall 2006).

normative. It is also possible to ask about how beliefs affect our lives, how propositions are translated into experience, what difference they make to us. John Henry Newman distinguished between notional assent and real assent—where the latter connotes a vivid active relation between the believer and the belief assented to. When the American pragmatist William James characteristically spoke of the “cash value” of an idea, he did not mean money. His point was that when beliefs don’t make a difference or remain purely intellectual commitments they often have little or no relevance to religious life. Many a time it is difficult to grasp what a belief is about until one can make the move from the formula to the corresponding experience.

The elements we began with in the Rav’s outlook have clear “cash value”: they affect our political and religious principles and policies in the present and our plans and imagination of the future. Likewise, the vigorous “messianic” ideology from which the Rav distances himself has “cash value.” This type of Messianism promotes a sense of acute expectancy and buoyant confidence about prospects in the future; more specifically it focuses hopes on collective redemption. In what follows, we shall look at four of the Rav’s less prominent remarks about the idea of the Messiah, with an eye to their “cash value,” how they affect living experience.

## I. AGAINST THE WORD “MESSIANISM”

Perhaps the most conspicuous comment in the Rav’s writings touching on eschatology is his rejection of the term “messianism” (*meshihiyut*) in a crucial 1960 essay “On the Study of Torah and Redemption of the Generation’s Soul.”<sup>2</sup> The Rav had given a brief interview to Elie Wiesel, then a journalist for *Yediot Aharonot*<sup>3</sup> while waiting at Yeshiva University to travel to the airport on his way home to Boston. At the time, the Rav’s name was being mentioned prominently as the potential Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi following the death of R. Isaac Herzog and the interview reflected the current interest. Some months later, while recovering from his treatment for cancer, the Rav responded in the American Hebrew weekly

2 Full version is in *Be-Sod ha-Yahid ve-ha-Yahad*, ed. Pinhas Peli (Jerusalem, 1976), 403–432. This essay, as of yet untranslated, was described by R. Aharon Lichtenstein as “the single best introduction to the Rav’s thought.” See *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. 1 (Ktav, 2003), 202.

3 Eliezer Wiesel, “Aliyat No’ar Yehudi me-Artzot ha-Berit Hi be-Behinat Halom Yafeh...,” *Yediot Aharonot*: 7 Yamim–Mossaf le-Shabbat (Friday, 13 November 1959), 7.

*Ha-Doar* to critical questions posed about the content of the interview by the editor, Moshe Meisels.<sup>4</sup>

At the very beginning of his response the Rav dissociates himself from some of the reported content: "It was impossible for Mr. Wiesel, a man of broad culture and a professional journalist, to record my words as I said them, as they came out of my mouth. Therefore, he was compelled to transmit the conversation in different idioms and terms, in his worthy formulation. Understandably, the changes of form end up altering elements of the content itself" (404).

One of these journalistic changes was Wiesel's use of the word "messianism." The Rav insists that this word was never part of his vocabulary; for that reason, he could not have used it in the interview. Why does the Rav avoid the word "messianism"? His fundamental explanation is that traditional normative belief, as taught in the Talmud and codified by Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuva* and in *Hilkhot Melakhim*, identifies faith in the advent of the Messiah in individual terms, while "messianism" refers not to a person, but to an abstract concept. Let us first examine what is wrong with the modern "messianic" idea and then ask about the positive advantage of the traditional idea, as the Rav interprets it.

The Rav's dogmatic claim against the word "messianism" is that "it leaves out the personal motif of belief regarding the Messiah and is thus liable to undermine the entire edifice." Anyone who reads the primary sources "will sense immediately that the personal portrait of the king Messiah is the focus of the messianic principle." A few lines later the Rav observes:

[A] slight deflection from personal pronoun to abstract pronoun loses the entire essence of this religious principle. Moreover: by formulating a new verbal form, engendered by abstraction, on the one hand, and subjectification, on the other hand, a specific religious reality turns into an abstract idea, and a robust, powerful act of objective faith deteriorates into an obscure, foggy psychological state. Modern man who thirsts for God but has lost his way to God does not perceive the power of objective belief as a fundamental act relating man to his Creator, and has failed to direct his efforts to acts of total faith that are linked to an absolute transcendent reality. Members of our generation start with the psychology of faith and end up with the emptiness of denial.

The Rav's emphasis on the centrality of the Messiah being an individual constitutes a critique of rationalistic views of redemption, often directed

4 See Jeffrey Saks, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate: Biographical Notes" *B.D.D.* 17 (2006), 45–67.

to worldly social and material goals, views that were staples of liberal Christian, Jewish, and secular thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> In fact, non-Orthodox prayerbooks from this period predictably excise the person of the Messiah from the second benediction of the *Amida*: God does not bring a redeemer, but redemption. The Rav's remarks are consistent with his general skepticism about abstract and subjective theological teaching.

The lines of text that I omitted offer the Rav's positive reasons for faith in the Messiah as an individual. Here is the salient idea, according to the Rav:

[T]he redemption will come through a redeemer of flesh and blood, with all characteristic traits, who will appear as the agent of God, when He so wills it. The human being, despite being a finite creature, limited and conditioned, who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, can rise to the level of divine mission. The personal-Messianic aspect highlights the central status of the idea of choice that grants human beings the capacity for self-transcendence and elevation to the infinite and eternal.

The phrase "flesh and blood" can be taken to exclude Christian dogma which attributes divinity to the Messianic person. In the context of this essay, however, the Rav is not stressing the human figure as opposed to a supernatural being. Instead, he is warning against depersonalizing the Messiah, as happens when the normative Jewish language, with its concrete human connotations, is replaced by the abstract "Messianism." He is rejecting the idea of redemption through progress, perhaps inevitable deterministic historical progress; he is doing so in the name of human initiative and self-transcendence. The "cash value" of the Messianic dogma, then, is the stress on human action, which confirms the individual creativity that is an essential component of the Rav's philosophy and of his specific brand of religious Zionism.

It may be instructive to compare the Rav's statement with an article published only a few years before. Professor Steven Schwarzchild criticized the liberal dismissal of traditional Messianic belief.<sup>6</sup> He ascribed the liberal attitude to three factors, all of which were, in his opinion, specious. One could not oppose the personal Messiah as overly nationalistic

5 For a recent survey of Jewish messianic thought from Mendelssohn to Cohen, see Yaakov (George) Kohler, *Ha-Meshihuyot be-Idan ha-Emantzipatzia: Mi-Malkhut Bet David le-Sotzializm shel Aharit ha-Yamim* (Idra, 2021).

6 Steven S. Schwarzchild, "The Personal Messiah-Toward the Restoration of a Discarded Doctrine," *Judaism* 5:2 (1956), and is reprinted in *The Pursuit of the Ideal: Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzchild*, edited Menachem Kellner (SUNY Press, 1990), 15–28. The Rav knew Schwarzchild; hence it is likely he knew of the article.

because the program of a personal Messiah might well be universalistic in content. One could not deny it as relying on the miraculous, because some forms of Messianism (that of Maimonides, for example) did not presuppose miraculous interventions, and even from a naturalistic perspective it is improbable that the Messianic age would arrive without such radical transformation. As for faith in the inevitability of progress, the twentieth century had refuted that avenue to redemption.

Though he could have scored easy points against Jewish religious liberalism, the Rav did not name the champions of the position he rejects. He could also have assailed the idea of “messianism” on any of the grounds that Schwarzchild adduced, associating the traditional view with nationalism, supernaturalism, and sober realism about human progress. On this occasion, however, he chose to make the case for the traditional doctrine of the Messiah by appealing to ideals of individualism and human activism.

## II. DEFINING REDEMPTION

The essay “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” delivered in 1973 and published in 1978,<sup>7</sup> contains an unusual definition of redemption.

Redemption involves a movement by an individual or a community from the periphery of history to its center; or, to employ a term from physics, redemption is a centripetal movement. To be on the periphery means to be a non-history-making entity, while movement towards the center renders the same entity history-making and history-conscious. Naturally the question arises: What is meant by a history-making people or community? A history-making people is one that leads a speaking, story-telling, communing free existence, while a non-history-making, non-history involved group leads a non-communing and therefore a silent, unfree existence (55).

What attracts attention here is the breadth and inclusiveness of the definition, its universality. The Rav’s idea of redemption knows neither Jew nor Gentile. For that matter, it is not inherently theocentric: one may experience oneself, or one’s community, as either central or peripheral without explicitly putting God in the story, though religious individuals and groups can hardly confront their destiny without reference to God. One further notes the emphasis on story-telling and speech. This conception fits the theme of the essay, which binds redemption to

7 *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 55–72.

Torah study and prayer, the two main frameworks of communion between man and God. The Rav, however, here employs the contrast of speech versus silence in a phenomenological sense, meaning to experience the meaningfulness of speech, so that his definition of redemption is not dependent on linguistic achievements or institutions.

There is another point about the Rav's definition of redemption that might strike many readers as odd. We commonly think of redemption first and foremost as a substantial, life-changing improvement in our situation. We may be liberated from a difficult situation, freed from grave hardship, or we find ourselves recipients of great boons. The benefits we hope for and appreciate may be material gains, or they may change our psychological or cultural state for the better. Given the spiritual associations of the word "redemption" we are more likely to use it for the latter than merely for the former. The Rav's definition astonishingly sidesteps the valorization of redemptive change as good or bad in the conventional sense of these evaluations. Redemption, according to this definition, need not make us prosperous or happy. Redemption does make us free, in the sense that we become central to our own lives rather than peripheral. In Brisker parlance, this definition of redemption addresses individuals and groups under the aspect of *gavra*, not that of *heftza*.

Returning to the language of "cash value" or "real assent," the Rav's definition quietly transforms the content of our hope for redemption by redefining the way in which that hope corresponds to our lived experience.

Here the Rav implicitly addresses the challenge for anyone who seeks to incorporate hope into a realistic religious worldview: Hope is faith in things unseen; it relates to the contingent future that is not yet experienced. Merely to imagine the possibility of a good future and to desire it, without having grasped its content and apprehended the efforts leading to it, is wishing—and wishing is not hoping. Wishing in itself does not entail acting to realize one's dream. The alternative to such abstract hope is to stake one's destiny on the vision of a glorious future that is discontinuous with the reality of our concrete experience. In that case one may end up following a strenuous scenario that is not quite specific enough to be rational, and to advocate for a road map that is liable to rely more on manipulating external conditions than on self-cultivation. Such ambitious projects risk delusion and catastrophe when the means mobilized prove inadequate to the task, spiritually and materially, even as they serve as a distraction from the redemption that grows out of spiritual effort.

Here is where the Rav's definition can help. As we have seen, the Rav ties "redemption" to the experience of being at the center. Such an experience is real, in a way that wishing for good things to happen is not.

And while the realization of such “redemption” is not wholly independent of external circumstances, it is very much anchored in the agency-experience of the individual or the group struggling for redemption. Though such hope may turn out to be mistaken, and may end in disappointment and disillusion, its attainment is not wholly external to the living experience of the person or community. A conception of redemption that defines it primarily as a product of external events that happen to us as opposed to events and processes in which we participate actively is more liable to depend on the vicissitudes of external circumstances.

Our discussions of the Rav’s definition of redemption and his distaste for the word “messianism” reach conclusions that are compatible with his overall thinking about human existence and the Zionist endeavor. Note, however, that our analysis of the two texts moves in different directions. With respect to “Messianism” the Rav begins with the canonical formulation of the dogma, in which the mission of a particular individual, descended from David, is an essential component. What was new with the Rav is his explanation of the impact of that doctrine on Jewish experience, the recognition that a personal Messiah goes together with, and reinforces the value of, and vocation of the individual and his initiative. With respect to the Rav’s concept of redemption, we start with a free-standing definition that is not bound to standard theological norms. By working out the full implications of the definition we can uncover its implications for the type of hopeful and resolute existence he recommends.

Let me close my remarks about the Rav’s definition of redemption with a note about his view of the Hebrew equivalent. In the essay we are examining he devotes attention to the halakha that mandates the juxtaposition of *ge’ula*—the third benediction following the Shema—and the *Amida* that follows it without interruption during the morning prayers.<sup>8</sup> The third benediction culminates in the phrase *ga’al Yisrael*. One would thus suppose that the root *ga’al* is the Hebrew equivalent of the English word “redemption.” Nonetheless, in the original lecture that became “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” the Rav denied this. He claimed that *ga’al* and its cognates should be reserved for the redemption from Egypt and the Messianic eschaton; other types of redemption, coming under his definition of the term, should be rendered in Hebrew by *pedut*.

8 The requirement of juxtaposition does not apply to the evening prayers (see discussion *Berakhot* 4b). Note that the Rav also dealt with halakhic questions arising from the redemption-prayer link in *Shiurim le-Zekher Avi Mori*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1985), 35–57, and particularly 50ff. I believe the English essay and Talmudic discourse can be read independently of each other. For further halakhic analysis, by the Rav, see R. Zvi Reichman and R. Moshe Reichman, *Reshimot Shiurim al Massekhet Berakhot* (2012), 52–67.



When Aviezer Ravitzky undertook to translate the essay into Hebrew after its appearance in *TRADITION*, the Rav indeed instructed him to use *pedut*.<sup>9</sup>

This distinction should give us pause. It seems that in Biblical Hebrew *ga'al* and *pada* are synonyms. *Ge'ula* is often used to describe an exchange or transaction: to redeem, in this sense, means to buy back a field (Leviticus 25:49), as English would speak of redeeming a coupon. *Pada*, too, refers to getting something back: as when one “redeems” *ma'aser sheni* in order to eat it outside of Jerusalem or, in rabbinic literature, one pays ransom for captives.<sup>10</sup>

There is one other passage in the Rav's production pertinent to the relationship of *ga'al* and *pada*. In the lectures on repentance, as transcribed by Pinchas Peli, the Rav contrasts gradual repentance and atonement with transformative repentance and forgiveness.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the Rav interprets Psalm 130 (“from out of the depths”) as progressing from a petition for forgiveness (*seliha*) for specific sins, to the request for redemption (*pedut u-ge'ula*) from sin overall. As the Rav observes, the Psalm does not culminate in divine forgiveness, but rather in divine “redemption (*yifde*) of Israel from all its sins.” Immediately afterwards, the Rav refers to Isaiah (44:22): “Return to me for I have redeemed you (*ge'altikha*).” Here, if we follow Peli's translation and editorial work (which was not reviewed by the Rav) the Rav does not seem to make anything of the distinction between the two roots; he treats them like synonyms.

The question remains: Why did the Rav care about pursuing this distinction, to the point where he wanted it expressed in the Hebrew translation? I believe that by insisting on a distinction between the word *ge'ula* and *pidyon*, the Rav was subtly qualifying the broad scope of his English definition of redemption. That definition, as we have noted, does not distinguish between “sacred” and “mundane” manifestations of redemption. Both categories exemplify the movement from periphery to center that is the hallmark of redemption. The differentiation between two Hebrew roots designating redemption restores the awareness that not all forms of redemption are the same. The great acts of redemption in Jewish history—the exodus from Egypt and the Messianic eschaton—occupy a special status and cannot be identified with the “everyday” process of redemption covered in the Rav's general definition. This insight brings us back to the *Ha-Doar* article, where the Rav was anxious to avoid associating himself with the modern tendency to define “Messianism” without the distinctive characteristics of traditional belief and theology.

9 Conversation with Prof. Ravitzky circa late 1981.

10 See for example, Ramban on Exodus 8:18.

11 *Al ha-Teshuva* (Jerusalem, 1974), 232–234.



### III. FAITH IN KNESSET ISRAEL

As noted above, in connection with the *Ha-Doar* article, the later chapters of Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuva* include references to eschatological teachings. For that reason alone, the reader of Rambam must consider how the Messianic theme is linked to repentance. In his lectures on repentance, the Rav ponders this fact more than once.

One of the essays presented in *Al ha-Teshuva* is devoted to those aspects of repentance that are bound up with the individual Jew's membership in Knesset Israel—the Jewish people as a metaphysical, organic entity. The Rav suggests that attaining the kind of integration within Knesset Israel of which he speaks requires “faith in Knesset Israel.”<sup>12</sup> He argues as follows: According to the view of R. Eliezer, which Rambam adopts in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (7:5), the redemption of Israel is dependent on its repentance. At the time of the first destruction, God promised restoration and belief in restoration could thus be grounded in the divine promise. Since there is no such divine promise regarding redemption today, after the second destruction, faith in the advent of Messiah is contingent upon faith in Israel repenting. If faith in the people Israel's returning to God is a premise or postulate of the Messianic dogma, we are not justified in believing firmly and confidently in the latter without being equally committed to the former.

The Rav's analysis here is tied to his reading of Rambam, which, in turn, is anchored in R. Eliezer's view of eschatological repentance. What is noteworthy from our perspective in this essay is that faith in the Messianic doctrine, which can be viewed as a proposition about the future that is remote from our present experience and disconnected from our ongoing obligations, is here linked to faith in the repentance of the Jewish people. The consequence is that Messianic faith expresses itself in real, experiential terms, through our ongoing faith in and commitment to the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people.

### IV. REPENTANCE: EVERY MAN HIS OWN MESSIAH

Later in the lectures on repentance the Rav comes back to the crucial sections on eschatology in Rambam and employs language pertaining to the Messiah in a manner that draws further connections between Messianic faith and the life of repentance and atonement.<sup>13</sup> Above, we noted the contrast the Rav discovered in Rambam between the

12 See *Al ha-Teshuva*, 93–98.

13 Our discussion here refers to *Al ha-Teshuva*, 235–238.

piecemeal repentance mandated in the early chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuva* and the radical transformative repentance described in chapter 7. The Rav goes on to say:

This is how the redemption of the individual appears and what goes for the individual goes for the collective . . . . When redemption comes to Klal Israel, the King Messiah will appear suddenly, in the blinking of an eye, inadvertently, in surprise, and everyone will be excited. In a few minutes—behold, the Jewish people are redeemed.

In the text as published by Peli, the Rav goes on to relate a long story he heard from his father in the name of R. Hayyim of Volozhin. R. Hayyim, in this story, imagines the coming of Messiah as an unexpected event. A moment before his wife had asked him to keep watch over the breakfast being cooked while he reviews his daily *shiur*. Then Messiah arrives; R. Hayyim is distressed that his Shabbat garb, which he must wear to greet the Messiah, is missing a button, and as he frets over his clothing, his wife rebukes him for letting the food burn, to which R. Hayyim replies that the burnt dish is beside the point in the light of the Messiah's arrival. The Rav applies the moral of the story to the Messiah who, in the transformational model of chapter 7, comes to redeem the individual Jew from sin. Only yesterday the sinner was alienated from God, wicked and rejected. Suddenly, everything has changed: the Messiah, bringing redemption, strides towards him.

From a literary perspective, we must first recognize that the story is not part of a discourse on Messianism but an anecdote that illustrates by analogy the theme of repentance that is the subject under consideration. Moreover, the Rav does not offer R. Hayyim's story as identical with his own eschatology. He repeats (at some remove) this interesting account that he heard from his father in the name of R. Hayyim Volozhin. In a word, the anecdote includes more than is needed for the discourse on repentance. The details of the picture we get of the Messianic advent is partial and practically external—we are not told what the Jewish people should have done to merit redemption, nor do we get information about the content of the redemption, beyond it being good for the Jews.<sup>14</sup>

The analogy itself compares Messianic redemption and redemption from sin in transformative atonement. R. Hayyim imagined the Messianic arrival as sudden, unexpected, and radical. The Rav suggests the same

<sup>14</sup> Not every anecdote about his forbears that appears in the Rav's work should be taken as an expression of his identification with its message. On the functions of the Rav's storytelling see Alex Sztuden, "Why are There Stories in *Halakhic Man*?" in *Rav Shalom Banayikh*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Ktav, 2012), 313–329.

for the transformative “Messianic” repentance: in the blinking of an eye, everything is different. Adopting this analogy does not entail conclusions about the worthwhileness of human goal-oriented behavior, about the Zionist project or activism, or about such behavior’s lack of value.

Yet side details in the R. Hayyim Volozhin story have connotations that are worth registering. On the one hand, as noted, Messianic redemption here is not identified with a specific political program. It is about a change in the very nature of existence, as it were, rather than the reversal of external circumstances. It is spiritual, not material or political. Inadvertently, the Rav’s narrative reinforces his criticism of the “Messianism” slogan from which he distanced himself in the *Ha-Doar* missive.

On the other hand, perhaps paradoxically, the details of the story as the Rav tells it place the imagined scenario in a highly naturalistic setting. True, the birds sing more rapturously, and the sun shines more brightly, but R. Hayyim’s world on the day Messiah is greeted has all the character of our everyday world, where classes must be prepared and taught, where failure to mend a button in time is a cause of regret, where not paying attention to food on the stove can ruin breakfast. In the story, of course, R. Hayyim has the last word, dismissing worldly matters in the ecstasy of transformative redemption. Yet those of us familiar with the Rav’s universe know it is one in which the Rosh Yeshiva’s idealism is not the only voice heard; it is tempered by the Rebbitzin’s reality check. Had the Rav himself determined the printed version of his lectures on repentance, he might or might not have incorporated this leisurely anecdote. As the text stands, we are left with a subtly Maimonidean depiction of the Messianic redemption, a strictly halakhic and predominantly spiritual vision of the personal King Messiah reordering the world, even as the laws of nature and the practices of everyday life remain intact.