

Torah Thoughts Tzav

5779:

Here is my favorite (and only) Jewish messiah joke: One day, coming back from trading in the town, a village's men find a beggar sitting at the side of the road leading into the village. 'Moishe' they say, 'What are you doing out here?' He told them 'The rabbi appointed me as the village watchman. I sit here all day watching for the messiah.' 'What kind of job is that!' they say. 'Well,' Moishe said, 'the pay is not too good, but it's steady work.'

I mention this as we approach parshat Tzav because the Hebrew word for 'messiah' is *moshiakh*, or 'anointed one.' In parshat Tzav, the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) is anointed with oil as a symbol of his office and his responsibilities. Later, in the period of the monarchy, it was the King of Israel who was so anointed. Biblical and rabbinic Judaism understood the pouring of oil over a leader's head as a sign of his appointment by God as religious or military leader. During the first century, the idea of a future messiah figure gained ground among Jews, probably in response to the terrible events surrounding the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem under Roman occupation. The messiah took on aspects of being a national savior, a person who would reconstitute the Jewish people in Israel and defeat their enemies (note: not a deity).

Over the centuries, the absence of a true messiah became part and parcel of how Jews internalized the idea of the ultimate redemption: The messiah is always just out of reach, constantly and sometimes fervently hoped for, but with a hope tempered by realism. As Jews, we need the idea of a messiah as much as we always have, but we know that until such a leader appears, we must do the heavy lifting of creating a world of righteousness, bringing the time of the messiah closer through our actions even in the absence of the messiah himself.