

Be Ha'alotecha 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, June 7, 2014

I heard this story this past week... In the days leading up to the Senate election, when Cory Booker's political campaign was really rolling along, Lewis Katz, of blessed memory, called Cory Booker and said to him, "Cory, Cory, don't think you are anyone special just because you get elected to the United States Senate because any idiot can get elected to office. In fact most idiots do. It is what you DO with the office that really counts!"

The goal was not to get elected, but to use the office for the good of others. And this made me think of this week's Torah portion where we read about the making of the Menorah in the Mishkan. That menorah became the symbol of the Jewish People. It is the same 7 – branched Menorah that now sits outside the Knesset in Israel. And there is a famous Midrash that tells of the craftsmen's celebration of building the Menorah for the glory of Gd. But then Gd looks down at them and essentially says, "Any idiot can build a Menorah!" "I", Gd says, "am the Creator of light. I don't need you to make Me a Menorah. I need you to use the Menorah to be a light unto the nations and to be a source of good in the world."

This week we are beginning a new Sermon Series on "The Jewish View of the Messiah." And I want to say from the outset that there is no one single approach to this issue, no single understanding of who the Messiah will be or what the world will look like when the Messiah comes. The only two things, in fact, that unite all Jews is the belief that the Messiah has not gotten here yet AND that we all have a hand in bringing the Messiah.

The Messiah has always been associated with light because the origin of messianic thought in Judaism came in one of our darker times. It was thought that a redeemer of the Jewish People would come from the line of King David, but there was so much infighting among David's children that when he died people could not imagine a great political leader who was capable of bringing all the Jewish People together again. Instead, the tradition shifted the responsibility to ordinary folk to bring that Redeemer.

What will the time of the Messiah look like? Well, according to one opinion in the Talmud it will be a time when Jewish law is abrogated because it is no longer needed. People won't need to be told what to do because they will all naturally want to do the right thing. So according to this opinion not only will we have no need for Jewish Law we won't even celebrate most of the Jewish holidays. Why not? Because the whole purpose of the holidays is to feel closer to Gd and people will naturally cling to Gd all the time without having to have special celebrations reminding them of how important this is. So with everyone looking to feel close to Gd all the time there will be no injustice in the world and everyone will treat each other fairly. That's one traditional view of what the Messianic age will look like.

But the funny thing is that when we hear the word "Messiah" we don't usually think of Judaism and that's because Christianity took this central idea and co-opted it as its own.

Interestingly, Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher actually credits Christianity with helping to maintain the idea of Messiah in Jewish thought. Maimonides, or Rambam as he is also known, believed that what makes the idea of Messiah so powerful is that it pushes us ever forward to a better world, and that this is exactly what Christianity AND Islam when done right are trying to do as well. Rambam suggests that the Jewish world can learn from the non-Jewish world about how to make the world a better place. No single religion, says Rambam, has a corner on Messiah. Every religion that supports life and kindness and compassion longs for a time when these values will reign supreme. And from that longing and hope comes a game plan for action. Don't talk to me about faith; show me your faith in action. Don't just give me a vision, give me a game plan. Don't just talk about your - ideals live them. What makes the messianic idea so compelling is that even in the darkest of times it reminds us that history is moving forward and that the potential for a brighter future is in our hands.

In what seems to be one of the most ridiculous lines of the Torah, Parshat Re'eh begins, "*Re'eh Anochi Noten Lifnaychem Ha-Yom B'racha U'klalah*" – "Behold I set before you today" – says Gd- "A blessing and a curse...there fore choose life." What kind of choice is that?! Who in their right mind would choose a "curse?" Who wouldn't choose blessings? Who wouldn't choose life? Those who don't truly believe in the future. Yeah, we all believe that there is going to be a future but we don't believe it as much as we believe in the future. We are, "It is what it is." But the messianic idea reminds us that Jews should be saying, "It's not yet what it could be."

Even in the darkest of times, and we will all have them, we Jews embrace the idea that the best is yet to be. That's why the "Diary of Anne Frank" is the best selling book in world history after the Bible. Her message was nothing short of messianic – a message of hope and renewal in her day and in every age. She wrote 70 years ago this month: "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness; I hear the ever approaching thunder which will destroy us, too. I can feel the suffering of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

Jewish messianism is the courage to care; the courage to create in the face of failure and frustration; messianism is the courage to choose life in the face of death; it is the resolve to use the gifts that Gd has given us for the good of others; it is the triumph of the human spirit. It is a real and true hope in the future, and it is our spiritual inheritance.