

Shelach Lecha 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, June 14, 2014

The story is told of an old Russian Jewish man who was paid by the elders of his city one ruble per month to sit at the main crossroads outside the city and wait for the Messiah/Moshiach. That way he would be the first person to greet the Moshiach upon his arrival. A friend saw him sitting there day after day and finally said to him, “The pay for your job is SO LOW!” But the man replied, “Yeah, but the work is steady!” Today I’d like to continue our discussion about the Jewish view of the Messiah for whom we patiently wait.

As I said last week, there are a great many opinions about what the messianic age will look like and feel like. The prophet Isaiah famously said that it will be the time when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, to which Woody Allen said, “Yeah, the lamb and the wolf will lie down together – but the lamb won’t get much sleep!” There are indeed a great many Jewish opinions about the Moshiach and a vast amount of literature with varying opinions. In fact, there are only two aspects upon which all Jews agree: The first is that it hasn’t happened yet, and the second is that we have a hand in bringing the messiah.

It is on this second element that I’d like to continue the discussion today. One key element in the coming of the Messiah is Elijah, who is supposed to be the forerunner of the Messiah – his “advance crew” if you will. And it is for that reason that Elijah hangs around so much in Jewish life. As most of you will remember, we welcome Elijah into our homes at Passover, and at a bris, and we sing to him every Saturday night in havdalah. And the reason Elijah mystically hangs around in our daily lives is because Elijah is one of the two people in the Bible who did not die. (Enoch is the other.) He went directly to heaven in a whirlwind. And so, Elijah is seen as having a special relationship with Gd and with the Messiah who will come to earth on Gd’s behalf.

Now the Talmud records a conversation between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Elijah the Prophet. (Never mind that Elijah lived in the 9th century BCE and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi lived in the 3rd century CE. If Elijah can be at your seder in Cherry Hill he could have been hanging out with Rabbi Yehoshua, too!) Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met Elijah while the prophet was standing at the entrance to the cave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai in Israel. Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, “When will the Messiah come? Elijah answered, “Go and ask him, yourself.” Rabbi Yehoshua was amazed: “You mean I could find him and talk to him—now? Where is he?” Elijah said, “You can find him at the gates of Rome.” “How will I recognize him at the gates of Rome?” asked Rabbi Yehoshua. Elijah told him, “There he sits among the lepers whom you will find unwinding all of their bandages at the same time and then covering their sores with clean bandages. The Messiah is the only one who unwinds and rewinds his bandages one at a time, thinking, ‘I want to be ready at a moment’s notice if I am called’.”

Rabbi Yehoshua traveled from the cave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai all the way to Rome—a journey that seemed to take him only a few steps. He was not frightened by the

strong gates of the enemy nor the pitiful condition of the lepers. Keeping in mind Elijah's advice of how to identify the Messiah in the most unlikely of places among the most wretched of people, he quickly spotted the one poor sufferer who was unwrapping and rewrapping only one sore at a time. Rabbi Yehoshua approached him and said, "Peace be upon you, my master and teacher." The leper looked knowingly at him and replied, "Peace be upon you, son of Levi." Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, "When will the master/moshiach come?" "Today," said the leper. Rabbi Yehoshua returned to Elijah in the blink of an eye. Elijah said to him, "What did the Messiah say to you?" Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "He said, 'Peace be upon you, son of Levi'. But he lied to me, saying, 'Today I will come.' But he has not come." Elijah said, "No, he did not say that he would come 'today'. Rather, he was quoting a Psalm to you: "Today—if only you will listen to His voice." (Psalm 95:7)

There is so much about this legend that I find intriguing, but let's start with the idea that the Rabbis of the Talmud wanted us to know that the Messiah is already here, and that the voice of the Messiah might already be speaking to us. But you won't hear the Voice of Redemption on TV or the radio or in a major political event, even though the voice of the Moshiach can be heard in public. The Moshiach is clearly visible, but in a place where people are less likely to look. Elijah tells Rabbi Yehoshua to go look in the biggest city at its most crowded spot. Then find the people who seem most marginalized, the people living on the fringe, the people everyone sees and no one notices, and go pay attention to them. And in that group of people, go find the one who is most different, even from those who are clearly different from the rest of us. And then listen carefully to what he has to say.

Do you understand how radical – and how beautiful – a notion this is? In a time when power and might made right (not that different than our own!) our Spiritual Teachers urge us to find a vision of a better future by seeking out the people on the fringes, the people pushed to the side, the people who had little or no power, and little or no voice. You want to bring about redemption – be THAT kind of person! When the affluent, the Wolves of Wall Street, reach out to the lambs who sleep on the sidewalk – that's when the Messiah will come. And maybe we are not ready for that. Maybe we are not ready to lie down together with the homeless. But you are going to run across someone living on the margin and how you think about that person can change your world, and more importantly HER world for the better. And maybe the reason Judaism clings to a Messianic Ideal is to remind us that we need to seek those people out, to push outside our comfort zones, to empathize, to feel, and most importantly to listen. And it's not just the poor that Tradition is talking about – it is the lowly of spirit, the people who are just holding it together by binding one bandage at a time. The hurting, the humbled, the disheartened; in their voices we can hear the coming of the Messiah, the dawn of Redemption, if we can train our hearts to listen. Somewhere in your world there is someone who needs to hear your voice, and, more than you know, you need to hear theirs as well.