

Parashat Ekev, 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

I found myself becoming increasingly agitated as I read an academic article recently. I paused, perplexed by my growing degree of distress. After all, I had read far worse that day, of events in the world beyond the realm of ideas, of so much violence and strife, of such cruelty and inhumanity among people. Why did this article bother me so much? I began to understand, as I saw a link emerge between it and all the headlines of horror that had greeted me in the morning. However unintended, the article allowed for a self-satisfied and even celebratory acceptance of where we have come in human history, and an at least theoretical abdication of responsibility in the face of all the pain that still besets our world.

Questioning whether Tisha B'Av should still be observed as a day of mourning since the creation of Israel, the writer goes well beyond a more minimal, if common view, "while most religious Zionists believe that the State of Israel marks *the beginning* of the burgeoning of our redemption, my sense is that this rebirth and restoration are *the totality* of the promised redemption foretold by the prophets of yore...." Basing his view on a Talmudic statement that "there is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah, except for foreign domination of Israel," the writer shockingly suggests that, "we are already living in the Messianic era." While I admit to a feeling a certain flutter in regard to Israel's return to the land after two thousand years, I find it scandalous to root a highly particularistic and exclusive Messianism in a nationalist vision. All nationalisms come quickly to glorify the sword, flying in the face of the Messianic vision of Isaiah and Micah, of swords turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks, a time of universal peace when *nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more/lo yisa goy el goy cherev, v'lo yil'm'du od milchamah* (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3). It hardly seems that we are there yet.

I first became fascinated with the concept and moral power of Jewish Messianic thought as part of my discovery of Jewish support for my claim to conscientious objection as I wrestled with the draft and the horror of the Vietnam War. My introduction to the concept and language of Messianism came through an introduction by Erich Fromm to a small, now very yellowed, beloved copy of a late nineteenth century utopian novel called "Looking Backward" by Edward Bellamy. Referring to the flowering of the prophetic vision rooted in Isaiah and Micah, Fromm wrote; "this new state of society is called the *Messianic time*. The Messianic period is characterized by the end of conflict and fighting between people and people and between people and nature, by universal peace and justice, and by the end of nationalism." Hardly passive, Messianic thought is a stimulus for activism; a source for radical pacifism that is not content with what is, bidding us to make real in the present moment our vision of a universal future. Messianism becomes dangerous when it violates its own prophetic essence that is rooted in a vision of time more than person, when it triumphally defines the nature of Messiah too narrowly, including or excluding through faith, politics, or blood participation in the process of bringing that time.

Countering the violence that follows, at the outset of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ekev*, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Rothenberg sets a Messianic challenge. The portion begins with an exhortation to follow the commandments, *v'hayah ekev tish'm'un/if you follow on the heels of your hearing these ordinances and carry them out with care...* Suggesting consequence, *ekev* means heal and is the root of *ik'vot/footsteps*. Seeing more than the observance of commandments, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir teaches, *b'ik'vot m'shicha tish'm'un/you shall hear the footsteps of the Messiah*. An ultimate purpose is given to doing God's will, to transform and transcend all that violates what we know God's essence to be. A vision of the future is introduced that challenges the violence that is soon to come in the Torah portion and the violence that still benights our world. We are told in *Parashat Ekev* to walk in God's ways. The rabbis explain very simply that the ways of God are to be compassionate and merciful, and so shall we be. How then to be brutal, to destroy in the name of God? There is a dissonance that we are called to resolve in text and in life. To walk in the ways of God means to create a path for the Mashiach. The Me'or Eynayim, Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, offers a powerful teaching on *Parashat Pinchas*, another portion in which great violence occurs, *each person needs to prepare that aspect of the Messiah that attaches to their own soul/b'chinat mashiach ha'sha'yech l'chelek nishmato*. The footsteps of the Messiah come to be our own.

Among the Thirteen Articles of Faith as enumerated by Maimonides is both belief in and anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. The Slonimer Rebbe ponders why both, why isn't it enough to believe in the coming of the Messiah, why must one also anticipate that time? Anticipation becomes a prod to activism, to doing our part to bring the Messiah, a hedge against being satisfied with the status quo or accepting as good enough where we have come in human history. Of one who does not anticipate, the Slonimer writes, *the present situation is good in their eyes; one is as dead/k'mavet who does not anticipate salvation*. From the life and work of Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher, a fascinating nineteenth century Polish rabbi about whom I wrote a thesis many years ago, comes similar teaching, so powerful in its challenge to act, "we are not waiting for the Messiah, the Messiah is waiting for us."

How long the Messiah will have to wait is up to us. We dare not be satisfied with the world as it is. Amidst so much brokenness, Tisha B'Av is all too real. There is so much further to go until we fulfill the vision of creation and arrive at the day that is all Shabbat shalom. Walking in God's ways, may we create the path upon which to hear each other's footsteps until we come to that time of Messianic flowering, when *nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more*.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor