

Texts for Session #5 of Jewish Mythology – All texts from *Tree of Souls – the Mythology of Judaism* by Howard Schwartz and are for class use only.

610. THE SCALES OF THE MESSIAH

The Messiah was created when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. At that time God commanded Elijah the Prophet to bring scales to him. On one side of the scales Elijah would place the captive Messiah, along with the souls of the dead, and Elijah would fill the other scales with tears, torture, and the souls of the *Tzaddikim*. And when this had been done, God announced that the face of the Messiah would be seen when the scales were balanced.

This orally collected myth portrays the conditions that would enable the coming of the Messiah—a balancing of heavenly scales with the Messiah on one side with the souls of the dead, and the suffering of Israel with the souls of the *Tzaddikim* on the other. The idea is that God is well aware of the suffering of Israel, and when the time is right, He will send the Messiah to ease that suffering. This suggests a kind of heavenly mechanism to trigger the messianic era and the End of Days.

Sources:
IFA 6929.

611. THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE MESSIAH

King Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former glory. He will rebuild the Temple and gather all the exiles of Israel. All ancient laws will be reinstated in his days; sacrifices will again be offered; the Sabbatical and Jubilee years will again be observed according to the commandments set forth in the Law.

This statement by Maimonides is quite definitive, except that it does not include the resurrection of the dead, the last of Maimonides' own Thirteen Principles. Indeed, in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim* 11:3, Maimonides denies that the Messiah will bring the dead to life: "Do not think that King Messiah will have to perform signs and wonders, bring anything new into being, revive the dead, or do similar things."

The two other major requirements of the Messiah are listed here by Maimonides: the rebuilding of the Temple and the Ingathering of the Exiles. Thus Maimonides downplays the supernatural elements in the messianic tradition, viewing the messianic era in practical terms that could be accomplished without overthrowing the laws of nature. Indeed, in 12:1, he states this explicitly: "Let no one think that in the days of the Messiah any of the laws of nature will be set aside, or any innovation be introduced into creation. The world will follow its normal course."

Sources:
Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim 11:1.

Studies:
"Jewish Messianism in Comparative Perspective" by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky.
Moses Maimonides' Treatise on Resurrection, edited by Fred Rosner.

613. THE DESCENT OF THE MESSIAH'S SOUL

The soul of the Messiah lives in a palace in heaven. There is a potential Messiah born on earth in every generation. That person, known as the *Tzaddik ha-Dor*, the most righteous of his generation, has both an earthly soul and a heavenly soul. If the time is right for the Messiah to come, then the heavenly soul will descend and fuse with the earthly soul, and the days of the Messiah will have arrived.

In recent times some members of the Lubavitch Hasidim came to believe strongly that their Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, was the Messiah. In addition to a public campaign for "Messiah Now," Lubavitch theologians searched the existing messianic traditions for evidence that the Rebbe, as he was universally known, was the Messiah. Here they encountered two apparently contradictory traditions. One holds that the Messiah is a divine figure, who makes his home in a heavenly palace. The other tradition holds that the Messiah will be the *Tzaddik ha-Dor*, the greatest sage of his generation—a human being. These were originally two separate messianic traditions in Judaism, but they were eventually linked. The earthly, human Messiah was

identified as Messiah ben Joseph, who was said to pave the way for the heavenly Messiah, known as Messiah ben David. However, this myth held that Messiah ben Joseph would lose his life in the process. Before the death of the Rebbe, Jacob Immanuel Schochet, a prominent Lubavitch scholar, often lectured on the subject of the Messiah. There was no doubt that his descriptions of the qualities of the Messiah were intended to refer to the Rebbe. In these lectures, Schochet presented a new messianic theory, combining the myths of Messiah ben Joseph and Messiah ben David into a single myth. Here, rather than having one Messiah prepare the way for the other, the figure of the Messiah was simultaneously human and divine. This was made possible by the descent of the soul of the heavenly Messiah into the body of the human one. Thus, in the Lubavitch view, the heavenly Messiah himself will not descend, but merely his soul, which will fuse with the soul of the human Messiah. This made it possible to explain how a human, such as the Rebbe, could fulfill the role of Messiah ben David, the heavenly Messiah.

Sources:

4 *Ezra* 12:32, 13:25-26, 51-52; Lubavitch, oral tradition related by Jacob Immanuel Schochet.

615. THE MESSIAH WILL DESCEND FROM THE SIDE OF EVIL

For reasons known only to Him, God caused events to occur whereby the Messiah will be born from the realm of evil, for the Messiah will descend from the House of David. And King David was descended from Ruth the Moabite, and Moab was the son of one of the two daughters of Lot. After the destruction of Sodom, Lot, who was intoxicated, committed incest with his daughters. Thus when God said, "*I have found David*" (Ps. 89:21), where did He find him? In Sodom. Thus the soul of the Messiah is descended from such a place.

If the Messiah were to descend from a righteous person rather than the incestuous Lot, no enemy would have been able to prevail against Israel, or cause them to be forced into exile. God ordained things to happen this way, although no one knows why. David wanted to banish the evil side from which he had been born, eliminating it from the world, but he was unable to do so, for he had no power over the side of evil, since he had been born from it.

In the *Zohar* and later kabbalistic and Hasidic commentaries, the incestuous union of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38) is identified as the source of the power of the *Yetzer ha-Ra*, the Evil Impulse. This leads to the mysterious conclusion that the Messiah will descend from the side of evil. The key concept here is that the Messiah's soul is closest to evil, possessing great intensity. But in the messianic era the evil soul will be transformed, by a process of *tikkun*—repair or restoration—into the good.

Sources:

Genesis Rabbah 41:5; *Zohar* 1:109a-112a; *No'am Elimelekh, Likutei Shoshanah*, p. 101a; *Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik*, no. 111.

620. THE LADDER OF PRAYERS

The Ba'al Shem Tov was once praying with his Hasidim. That day he prayed with great concentration, not only word by word, but letter by letter, so that the others finished long before he did. At first they waited for him, but before long they lost patience, and one by one they left.

Later the Ba'al Shem Tov came to them and said: "While I was praying, I ascended the ladder of your prayers all the way into Paradise. As I ascended, I heard a song of indescribable beauty. At last I reached the palace of the Messiah, in the highest heavens, known as the Bird's Nest. The Messiah was standing by his window, peering out at a tree of great beauty. I followed his gaze and saw that his eyes were fixed on a golden dove, whose nest was in the top branches of that tree. That is when I realized that the song pervading all of Paradise was coming from that golden dove. And I understood that the Messiah could not bear to be without that dove and its song for as much as a moment. Then it occurred to me that if I could capture the dove, and bring it back to this world, the Messiah would be sure to follow.

"So I ascended higher, until I was within arm's reach of the golden dove. But just as I reached for it, the ladder of prayers collapsed."

In this Hasidic tale, "The Ladder of Prayers," the Ba'al Shem Tov ascends into Paradise on a quest to capture the golden dove of the Messiah, certain that this will cause the Messiah to follow, initiating the messianic era. The failure of the Ba'al Shem Tov's Hasidim to provide the support needed for this great endeavor, as symbolized by the collapse of the ladder of prayers, causes him to lose the opportunity to bring the Messiah. That makes this one more tale about why the Messiah has not come. Dozens of other such tales record lost opportunities to bring about the messianic era, or attempts to force the Messiah's hand, and hasten the End of Days.

This tale, and virtually the entire body of rabbinic, kabbalistic, folk, and Hasidic lore, exists in a mythological framework. The ladder of prayers the Ba'al Shem Tov ascends was surely inspired by the heavenly ladder in Jacob's dream. He climbs this ladder of prayers into Paradise, a mythological realm with its own order, its own geography, its own history, and its own inhabitants—not only God and the angels, but the Bride of God and the Messiah as well. It is understood that the Messiah is waiting for the sign to be given that the time has come for the messianic era. All the same, Jewish mysticism contains the secret of how to hasten the coming of the Messiah, secrets that the Ba'al Shem Tov has at his command.

In addition, this tale draws on a rich tradition of tales about heavenly ascent, from the ascent of Elijah in a fiery chariot to the famous tale of the four who entered Paradise. Indeed, "The Ladder of Prayers," a Hasidic tale of eighteenth century origin, is a direct descendant of the legend of the four sages, which dates from the second century. As did the four sages, the Ba'al Shem Tov ascends to heaven because he seeks greater knowledge of the divine realm.

The *Zohar* tells of a dove that makes its nest outside the palace of the Messiah in Paradise. That is why the palace of the Messiah is also known as the "Bird's Nest." "The Ladder of Prayers" builds on the earlier legendary accounts of the golden dove, reporting an attempt by the Ba'al Shem Tov to ascend on the ladder of prayers of his Hasidim into Paradise to capture the dove. The failure of the Ba'al Shem's Hasidim to provide the spiritual support needed for this great endeavor, as symbolized by the collapse of their ladder of prayers, is offered as the reason for the failure to bring the Messiah in their generation. Thus the tale illustrates the interdependency of the *Tzaddik* and his Hasidim. This attempt to capture the golden dove and its failure marks one of the basic types of mystical tales, those concerning an attempt to hasten the coming of the Messiah. Several such tales are found in the Talmud. See, in particular, "Forcing the End," p. 496. Subsequently such tales are found in virtually every generation, explaining that there is a potential Messiah who, had all gone well, would have served as Messiah ben Joseph, preparing the way for Messiah ben David. In this tale of the Ba'al Shem, however, he ascends directly to the palace of Messiah ben David, determined to initiate the End of Days. For a variant of this tale, see "The Messiah and the Ba'al Shem Tov," following. For a talmudic tale about a golden dove, see B. Ber. 53b. See also "The Golden Dove" in *Gabriel's Palace*, p. 41.

Sources:

Midrash Ribesh Tov; Or ha-Hokhmah, Parashat Beha'alotekha.

628. THE CAPTIVE MESSIAH

For many generations the Messiah has sat captive, chained with golden chains before the Throne of Glory. Elijah has tried to release him many times, but he has never succeeded. So Elijah descends to earth and explains that in order to break the chains of the Messiah, he needs a magic saw whose teeth are the deeds of Israel. Every deed adds a tooth to this saw, but every sin takes one away. When there are twice as many good deeds as there are sins, then the saw can be used. That is why it is said that the Messiah will not come until we bring him.

A number of texts describe the Messiah as bound in chains. According to *Pirkei Hekhalot Rabbati*, for example, God will tie up the Messiah hand and foot for eight years, and during the years that the Messiah is fettered, God will hide His face from him. This is a reminder that the decision of bringing the End of Days, which the Messiah will herald, does not belong to the Messiah, but to God, or to the people Israel, whose good deeds will make it possible. Adding to the complexity, there are even myths in which God Himself is in chains. See "Mourning over the *Shekhinah*," p. 58.

Sources:
IFA 6928.

636. THE VISION OF THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

The hand of the Lord came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "O mortal, can these bones live again?" I replied, "O Lord God, only You know." And He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus said the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again. And you shall know that I am the Lord!"

I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, O mortal! Say to the breath: Thus said the Lord God: Come, O breath, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again." I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude.

And He said to me, "O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.' Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the Land of Israel. You shall know, O My people, that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I the Lord have spoken and have acted"—declares the Lord.

The belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead can be traced to this powerful biblical myth of Ezekiel, in which God compels him to resurrect, with his prophesying, the bones in the valley of the dry bones. Here God's intention to bring the people of Israel back to life is presented as an explicit promise, with a powerful demonstra-

tion of God's ability to fulfill it. In messianic myth, the resurrection of the dead becomes one of the three primary requirements that must be fulfilled to initiate the messianic era. The others are the Ingathering of the Exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel's vision of resurrection was taken by later Jewish sources as a scriptural basis for a literal belief in resurrection. In the Talmud, for example, it is stated that "in the future the pious will sprout up and emerge in Jerusalem, and they will rise up in their garments" (*B. Ketubot* 111b). And chapter 34 of *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, an important midrashic text, states that "God opens the graves and opens the storehouses of the souls and puts back each soul into its own body."

Still another version of the resurrection of the dead is found in the *Responsum of Hai Gaon* 60a-b: "And God will stretch sinews upon them and cover them with flesh and envelop them with skin, but there will be no spirit in them. And then God will cause the dew of life to descend from heaven, in which there is the light of the life of the soul. And they will recognize that they had lived and died and then risen to life."

There is a debate in *B. Sanhedrin* 92b as to whether the resurrection of the dead as described in Ezekiel should be understood literally or taken as a parable: "Rabbi Eliezer said, 'The dead who were resurrected by Ezekiel stood up and sang songs of praise to God and immediately died.' Rabbi Judah said the story is a true event that served as a parable. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose said, 'The dead who were resurrected by Ezekiel went up to the Land of Israel, married and begat sons and daughters.' Hearing this, Rabbi Judah stood up and said, 'I am one of their descendants. You see these *tefillin*? They were given to me by my grandfather and once belonged to them!'" It seems likely that we are to understand Rabbi Judah's comments as a sarcastic response to Rabbi Eliezer ben Yose's literalism. However, this debate also serves as evidence of belief in the resurrection in Judaism, where it is listed as the last of the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides.

Sources:

Ezekiel 37:1-14.

639. THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

God keeps the souls of the dead alive, and the dead wait, their eyes fixed upon the resurrection.

The patriarchs sought to be buried in the Land of Israel, because the dead in the Land of Israel will be the first to come to life. Not only Abraham and Sarah are buried there, but also Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Leah. So too are Adam and Eve said to be buried nearby.

In the days preceding the coming of the Messiah, great events will befall the world. Ten territories will be swallowed up, ten territories will be overturned, and ten territories will have their inhabitants put to death.

When the Messiah comes, all mankind, the quick and those who were dead, will be one in the worship of God. In those days the dead of the Land of Israel will be the first to come back to life. The angel Michael will blow a great blast on the shofar, and the tombs of the dead will burst open in Jerusalem, and God will revive them. When the resurrection comes, those who arise from the dead will see the Eternal Spirit returning to Zion through the Gate of Mercy. This gate has been blocked for many generations. Therefore it is said of this gate that it will not be opened until the eyes of Israel are opened at the End of Days.

In the days of the Messiah, God will rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and Israel will go up in pilgrimage not three times a year, but on every New Moon and Sabbath. How will it be possible for all flesh to come to Jerusalem? In those days Jerusalem is destined to be as large as the Land of Israel, and the Land of Israel as large as the whole world. And how can they come from the ends of the earth? Clouds will carry the children of Israel to Jerusalem, where they will say their prayers, and then the clouds will carry them back to their homes, as it is said, *Who are these that float like a cloud?* (Isa. 60:8).

Then the walls of Jerusalem will disappear, and the Messiah will rebuild them with precious stones and pearls. The resurrected dead will inhabit this new Jerusalem, and they will be like Adam before he sinned.

After that, the bones of the righteous outside the Land will roll through underground caves until they reach the Mount of Olives in the city of Jerusalem. There God will restore their souls to them, and they will arise and enjoy the days of the Messiah along with those who have already come alive in the Land. And those who are resurrected will not die again and return to dust. But just as God endures forever, so they will live forever. God will give them wings and they will float in the air and fly like angels to the Garden of Eden, where they will learn Torah from God.

Based on Isaiah 26:19: *Oh, let Your dead revive! Let corpses arise! Awake and shout for joy, you who dwell in the dust!—For Your dew is like the dew on fresh growth; You make the land of the shades come to life.* Belief in the resurrection of the dead is the thirteenth of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles. One of the key requirements of the messianic era is the ingathering of the Exiles, while another is the resurrection of the dead. This key myth describes how that resurrection will take place in the End of Days, along with the ingathering of the righteous dead from where they are buried around the world.

Here it is understood that in the days of the Messiah the dead of the Land of Israel will rejoin the living, and the righteous dead outside the Land will return to the Land and come to life again.

The three patriarchs and their wives are believed to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 20 reports that Adam and Eve are also buried there.

In the days of the Temple, there were three pilgrimages a year, at the time of the agricultural festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Here it is imagined that in the messianic era these pilgrimages will take place much more often, on every new moon and Sabbath, with the people being carried to Jerusalem on clouds. This last detail demonstrates that although the dead will be brought to life, the nature of existence in the messianic era will be markedly different from what it was before the End of Days.

The question of whether the dead can be resurrected at all is raised and answered in *Pesikta Rabbati* 48:2: "Successive generations have asked: 'Can we believe that a dead man can be brought back to life?' God replied: 'Why do you have doubts as to whether I shall be able to quicken the dead? Have I not already quickened the dead by the hand of Elijah, by the hand of Elisha, and by the hand of Ezekiel? That which is to

be in the time to come has already been in this world.” This demonstrates that even among believers, there was some doubt about the resurrection of the dead. But it also provides a convincing reply from God, who points out that such resurrection is reported three times in the Bible.

Sources:

Genesis Rabbah 96:5; *Pesikta Rabbati* 1:1, 1:4, 1:6, 1:7, 48:2; *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1; *B. Sanhedrin* 92a-b; *Midrash Tehillim* 104:23; *Zohar* 1:12b; *Otot ha-Mashiah* in *Beit ha-Midrash* 2:58-63; *Otzar ha-Ma'asiyot*; *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:1; *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:1; *Ma'amar Tehiyat ha-Metim*; *Hesed le-Avraham* 33b; *Sefer ha-Hezyonot* 2:5; *Sefer Eliyahu* in *Beit ha-Midrash* 3:68-78.

641. THE WORLD TO COME

There are no bodies in the World to Come, only the souls of the righteous, who are bodiless, like the ministering angels. Since there are no bodies, there is no eating or drinking, nor anything that human bodies require in this world. So too there is no sleep or death, sadness or mirth. That is why the sages said, “The World to Come has neither eating, nor drinking, nor sex in it, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and enjoy the splendor of the *Shekhinah*.” Thus the souls of the righteous exist there without toil, but the knowledge they acquired in their lifetimes remains with them. Indeed, because of it they merited the life of the World to Come. Thus the crowns that they wear are the crowns of knowledge. And there, in the World to Come, they enjoy the splendor of the *Shekhinah*, for now they can grasp the truth of God that they did not know when they were burdened with a body.

Whoever believes in the two worlds—this world and the World to Come—will be considered a descendant of Abraham. But whoever does not, will not be considered his seed.

This myth is a reminder that life in the World to Come will be radically different from life in this world, and, in fact, will lack many of the pleasures associated with the living, such as the enjoyment of eating, drinking, and sex. Even the crowns that rabbinic

literature describes as being worn by the righteous in heaven are here presented in metaphorical terms—as crowns of knowledge. It seems clear that this more naturalistic description of the World to Come was intended to counter rabbinic and folk traditions of heavenly rewards that consist of gold and other precious items, such as the golden tables said to be awaiting the righteous in Paradise, as described in *B. Ta'anit* 24b-25a.

Sources:

B. Berakhot 17a; *Midrash Rabbah* 53:16; *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8.

662. THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH

The Messiah will not come until he is no longer needed. He will not come until a day after his arrival. He will not come on the last day, but on the last of all.

Kafka's paradoxical explanation of when the Messiah will come is so intriguing that it deserves a place in this collection of Jewish myths. It also reflects traditional Jewish teachings about the Messiah. The coming of the Messiah represents the initiation of the End of Days, the messianic era in which all of existence will be transformed, a return to a prelapsarian condition or a kind of heaven on earth. For this reason, the arrival of the Messiah is not important in itself; rather, it is the transformation that accompanies the arrival that matters. This is one way of understanding Kafka's comment that "The Messiah will not come until he is no longer needed."

Sources:

Parables and Paradoxes by Franz Kafka.