

# False Messiahs

Whenever a major crisis hits, I encounter people who love to talk about the Messiah. Originally the Messiah was simply an anointed king who would hopefully do a half-decent job of running fractious Israelite life. Then he became the focus of a return from Babylonian exile. The Talmud actually includes opinions to the effect that there would be no such phenomenon in the future. But since that time Messianism has become deeply embedded in Jewish religious life as an article of faith.

Chabad Lubavitch has been promoting the Moshiach for many, many years. But if I were a betting man I would lay heavy odds against an imminent appearance. After all, Jews can't even agree on who a Jew is, let alone accept one single religious authority. There are fanciful stories about the Messiah coming to earth, not being recognized, and going away in disgust.

But the idea has gripped our imagination since Roman times. Someone surely will come to get us out of the agonies of persecution and exile. This was why claims that Jesus was the Messiah gained no traction in Jewish circles because the mess continued long after he came and went.

The Jewish aspiration was first met by Bar Cochba who led a rebellion in Judea against Rome in 132-135 CE. He had coins printed declaring himself the Messiah. Initially, it looked as if he might just kick the Romans out and revive the Judean state. Rabbi Akiva called him the Messiah. The rest of the rabbis laughed it off. "Grass will grow out of your cheeks, Akiva, if you think he is the Messiah."

His failure did not stop the long roll call of people who either declared themselves Messiahs; or claimed to be the saviors of the Jewish people. There was Ishak ben Yaakov Ovadia of Isfahan (744-750) who was killed in battle. David Alroi another Persian Jew who lived around 1160 and promised to lead the Jews back home. He has a street named after him in Jerusalem. The English Prime Minister and novelist Disraeli wrote a novel based on him.

There were anonymous False Messiahs in Morocco and Yemen a thousand years ago. Maimonides wrote to refute the latter's claims in his *Letter to Yemen*. There would be another Yemenite false messiah Shuker Kuhal in the nineteenth century. Moshe Botarel was a rabbinic scholar who lived in Spain around 1413 and claimed to be the Messiah. He disappeared mysteriously. Asher Llamlein known as Asher Chai appeared in Istria, in 1502. He too vanished without a trace.

The duo of David Reubeni (1490–1541) and Shlomo Molcho (1500–1532) a former Marrano who reverted to Judaism, had more success for a while. They even met the Pope and Emperor Charles the Fifth and managed to get some relief for the persecuted Marranos. But Reubeni just fell away and Molcho who called himself the Messiah, was burnt by the church as a heretic.

Perhaps the most successful false Messiah of all was Shabtai Zvi (1626- 1676)

a charismatic Kabbalist of Smyrna, whose influence impacted the whole of Jewry. Samuel Pepys records that in London they were taking bets on him. Glückel of Hamelin started salting provisions to take with on the journey to the Holy Land. Communities split into gangs of rival supporters. Unfortunately, when he went to Constantinople to get approval from the Sultan to bring the Jews back to Israel he was told he had a choice. Convert or die. He converted to Islam. But the bubble did not completely burst.

Many of his followers declared themselves Messiahs. Baruchia Russo, Osman Baba, Mordechai of Eisenstadt, Jacob Querido who pretended to be Shabtai's son and with 400 followers converted to Islam in 1687, forming a sect called the Donmeh. They still survive in Turkey. Querido's son Berechiah succeeded him. There was Labele Prossnitz (early 18th century), Isaiah Hasid (a brother-in-law of the Judah Hasid), who lived in Mannheim and claimed to be the resurrected Messiah.

Most notorious of all was Jacob Frank (1726-1791). Another charismatic pseudo-Kabbalist. He organized controversial gatherings that turned into orgies. He claimed that sexual delight offered the way to the Divine. For a while, his message proved very popular amongst the poor, uneducated of Eastern Europe. The authorities did not approve. He was forced to leave the Jewish community. In 1759, he converted to Christianity. Then he ran afoul of the Catholic Church too and was imprisoned for heresy. Eve Frank, his daughter (1754–1816), hedging her bets, was declared the incarnation of the Virgin Mary as well as God. Some claim she was the only woman to have been declared a Messiah.

Almost all these false Messiahs rose during periods of harsh oppression, from Christianity, Islam, Crusaders, the Spanish Expulsion, the Chmielnicki Massacres, and Russian anti-Semitism, when Jews were under so much pressure they inevitably longed for a superman to come and rescue them. They also explain why Kabbalah got something of a bad name and was considered dangerous for the masses.

The rise of Hassidism, an amalgam of popular piety as well as mysticism ensured that the flame of Messianism continued to burn brightly while remaining part of the mainstream of Judaism. Some Rebbes were either seen as the harbingers of the Messiah or indeed as the Messiah himself. None of these claims have successfully met the aspirations of Messianism.

There was a movement within Religious Zionism inspired largely by the great Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook that thought that the establishment of the State of Israel was the beginning of the Messianic era. And the conquest of Jerusalem in 1967 gave added impetus to the claim. So far the Messiah has not obliged.

So where do we stand today?

In historical terms, the Jewish emphasis on a Messiah to come in the future, was simply to refute the Christian concept. Over time it has become a core belief in Judaism. But ideologues have over the years interpreted its significance in different ways. One is the optimism that the world can become a better more humane and just place. Either this can be achieved by human

endeavor and hard work or by Divine intervention. I cannot imagine someone surviving in the Nazi death camps thinking that they could in any way make the world better. Inevitably they will have prayed for miracles, for an army of liberation. But we with the freedom, knowledge, and means we have, do indeed have the tools to solve many of our human problems. The Messianic idea allows for both these possibilities.

I regret the attitude of many religious leaders in Eastern Europe during the 1930s as the threat of Nazism grew, who waited passively instead of encouraging flight. And the so-called religious preachers today who make fun of anything beyond their own narrow perspectives and reassure the masses that if they just perform religious duties (and contribute to their coffers) they will be safe.

In the current Covid crisis we can look for solutions from Heaven. But at the same time we must take precautions however inconvenient. We can work hard to find solutions, both social and medical. To re-examine the way our societies function. The Talmud is clear. We do not rely on miracles or Messiahs.