

CHAPTER 8, LAW 1(B) - THE COMING OF THE END, PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

The good which is reserved (lit., 'hidden') for the righteous is the life of the World to Come. This is the eternal life (lit., 'the life which has no death with it'), and the good without evil. This is as it is stated in the Torah, 'in order that it will be good for you and you will lengthen days' (Deut. 22:7). From our tradition [the Rabbis] have learned, 'in order that it will be good for you' -- in the world which is all good, 'and you will lengthen days' -- in the world which is eternally long. And this is the World to Come.

The reward of the righteous is that they will merit this bliss and be in this perfect state (lit., 'in this goodness'). And the punishment of the wicked is that they will not merit this life but will be cut off and die. Anyone who does not merit this life is considered dead, whose life is not eternal but who is cut off in his wickedness and perishes as an animal. This is the excision (Heb., 'karais') written in the Torah, as it is stated, 'Cut off, shall be cut off that soul; its sin is in it' (Numbers 15:31). From our tradition [the Rabbis] have learned (based on the fact that cut off is written twice in the verse), 'cut off' -- in this world; 'shall be cut off' -- in the World to Come. Meaning, that soul, which departs its body in this world, will not merit life in the World to Come, but will be cut off from the World to Come as well.

As we saw last week, this chapter of the Rambam takes us in an entirely different direction, discussing the future fate of mankind. I decided that to more fully understand the topics presented, I would provide a basic outline of the future -- both what happens to a person after he dies (to the small extent we can understand), and what the ultimate fate of the world will be.

Last week we discussed the fate of man after he dies -- where his soul goes and how his judgment works. This week I would like to examine a different, related issue: the ultimate fate of the world at the End of Days. Afterwards (G-d willing next week) we will devote a few more paragraphs to putting the entire picture together.

The Talmud states that the world will last in its current state for a total of 6000 years (Sanhedrin 97a). At some point towards the end, no earlier than year 4000 (ibid.), the Messiah will arrive to usher in a Utopian era. At the very least, the Messiah will bring Israel to full observance, conquer her enemies, and rebuild the Temple. The nations of the world will recognize the G-d of Israel and observe the Seven Noahide Laws. War and ignorance will become things of the past; the nations will pay homage only to G-d and to Israel.

I will quote some of the most moving verses in Isaiah on the matter:

"And it will be in the End of Days, the mountain of the L-rd's house will be established on the top of the mountains. It will be exalted above the hills; all the nations will flow to it. Many nations will go and say, 'Let us go and ascend to the mountain of G-d, to the house of the L-rd of Jacob, and He will teach us of His ways and we will go in His paths, for from Zion will come forth Torah, and the word of G-d from Jerusalem.' And He will judge the nations and rebuke many people. They will pound their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. A nation will not raise sword against nation, and they will no longer learn war" (2:2-4).

"And G-d alone will be exalted on that day" (2:11).

"They will no longer hurt nor destroy in My holy mountain, for the world will be full of the knowledge of G-d as the water covers the sea" (11:9). (See that chapter more generally for its description of the person of the Messiah.)

As I wrote, the above is the state the world will minimally reach in the period of the Messiah. In addition, the Talmud makes many statements implying the world will become far more miraculous, such as that many of the dead will come back to life (before the period of the Resurrection when everyone will rise, as we'll discuss), or that loaves of bread will grow from trees (Shabbos 30b), etc. There is a basic debate in the Talmud whether or not the Messianic period will or will not be miraculous (Brachos 34b). The Rambam himself accepts the opinion that, "There is no difference between this world and Days of the Messiah except the tyranny of the kingdoms" (9:2; Laws of Kings 12:2). Some suggest that the period will begin non-miraculously and the world will slowly become more supernatural as we approach the finale. Which of these opinions is correct? We'll have to wait and see.

Another issue which is exceedingly vague in the sources is the period leading up to the Messiah's arrival. There are so many seemingly contradictory statements regarding it -- in both the Prophets as well as the Sages -- as to make it virtually impossible to discern what exactly will occur before his arrival. The Talmud often refers to that period as the "footsteps of the Messiah" (ikvisa d'meshicha), when the world will undergo the "birth pangs of the Messiah" (chevlai moshiach).

That period will presumably be a very rough ride. Sages from the Talmud actually went on record saying that they would prefer not to be around when it happens (Sanhedrin 98b). The world will be too crazy and upside down -- quite likely great swaths of it being destroyed in the Armageddon (see Zechariah 13:8-9 and Sanhedrin 111a). One of the largest armies ever amassed will march on the Holy Land and will wreak terrible destruction -- until G-d reveals Himself and destroys them utterly (see Zechariah 14).

(My father OBM used to point out that the punishment G-d will visit on the invading armies sounds a lot like massive radiation poisoning: "And this will be the plague G-d will smite upon all the nations that gathered on Jerusalem: [Each one's] flesh will melt away while he is standing on his feet, and his

eyes will melt in their sockets, and his tongue will melt in his mouth" (v. 12). Perhaps Iran will attempt to nuke us and miraculously only the armies attacking us will be affected. Again, we'll just have to wait and see -- and of course repent beforehand.)

The Talmud does guarantee that Torah study and acts of kindness protect one from the birth pangs of Messiah -- although as we saw, Talmudic sages much greater than we were not prepared to rely on their own merit.

Given the vagueness of the era leading up to the Messiah, far be it from me to attempt to describe it any further. However, there are a few key points we should take away from this discussion. First of all, it appears that the Prophets and Sages were purposely vague in their description of the "footsteps of the Messiah" -- for the simple reason that there are many ways it may come true. It is clear from the sources (e.g. Sanhedrin 94a & 98a) that the Messiah can come in every generation, and virtually at any time. Who will he be? And who will be the wicked nation of Magog which will come to attack us (see Ezekiel 38-9)? How and where will the final battle occur? It had to be indeterminate -- because there are just so many ways it can come true.

The Talmud (San. 98a) likewise states that there is a final deadline when the Messiah must arrive, but if we merit it, he will come sooner. (This is based on Isaiah 60:22: "In its time I will hurry it" -- the Messiah will either arrive on time or be "hurried".) And similarly, the Talmud there states that how miraculous our salvation will be depends upon us. If we are righteous we will merit the Messiah of Daniel's image: "with the clouds of heaven came one as the son of man" (7:3), and if not he will be the "poor man riding on a donkey" of Zechariah (9:9). Thus, our image of the future is purposely vague. How it will actually occur is in our hands today.

(By the way, one should be exceedingly wary of people who claim that they **do** know the answers to such questions -- when the Messiah will arrive, just what the world will be like after he comes, etc. Predictions are cheap, and can always be explained away when they fail to materialize ("We weren't worthy of it this time because of XYZ, so they made a change of plans upstairs..." And usually the XYZ is either something so broad it can be reused indefinitely ("because we were too secular and not anxious enough for Messiah's arrival"), or something so insignificant as to do little more than reveal the cluelessness of the soothsayer ("because politician Joe Schmoe said the wrong thing").) Such issues are a classic example of the maxim that those who know don't say and those who say don't know.)

One other significant point is that the Talmud (San. 97b) curses those who attempt to predict the Messiah's arrival. This is for the simple reason that if their predictions do not materialize -- as has occurred so many times throughout our history -- they and their followers will be in for an enormous letdown -- as has also occurred far too often. (Interestingly, this never stopped many great rabbis throughout the ages -- as well as sages from the Talmud -- from doing just that.) Likewise, the Talmud (97a) states that the Messiah will only arrive when we are not thinking of him (lit., "during an

interruption of mind"). Maimonides likewise states that spending time pondering the Messiah's arrival brings a person neither to love nor to fear of G-d (Laws of Kings 12:2).

Focusing too much on the Messiah -- on some miraculous person or event to save us -- is not our job in this world. It is to live life as G-d wants us to. We know the end is coming -- and of course we eagerly await the Messiah's arrival. But such anxious anticipation does not rule our lives. We live in the present, trying to make the best of whatever situation G-d has granted us in life. We hope G-d will deliver us speedily, but until then, we had better be responsible for ourselves.

At last, even with all the above disclaimers, I will quote two choice signs of the Messiah's arrival from the Talmud (again from Sanhedrin 98, where much of the material from this lecture was drawn from).

(1) Said Rabbi Abba: You have no more revealed [sign of the] end than that which it is stated, "And you, mountains of Israel, you shall give forth your branches, and you shall bear your fruit for My nation Israel, for they will soon be coming" (Ezekiel 36:8). A sure sign of the Messiah is when the Holy Land becomes fruitful. It is well-known that Israel had been barren and unproductive for all who lived there. Everything from the Torah itself (Leviticus 26:32) to [Mark Twain](#) attested to the utter desolation which was the state of the Land during our absence. For century upon century no one has been able to cause it to produce more than meagerly -- until the modern settlers came and transformed it into the lush and productive farmland it is today. It is for a reason. The pieces of G-d's plan are falling into place.

(2) R. Yossi ben (son of) Kisma stated indirectly that the armies of Persia and Media (present-day Iran) will conquer Babylonia (Iraq), and proceed from there on a massive invasion of Israel. With current events as they are, both are certainly within the realm of possibility.

As above, we should not live our lives in bated-breath anticipation of the Messiah's arrival. We must make our own efforts at living our lives, improving our world, and making Israel safe for generations to come. Yet it is worthwhile to be aware of just how imminent his arrival appears to be. The vast majority of the signs mentioned in our tradition have already come to being. The world is quickly being readied. We must be ready as well.

Thus far we have discussed the era of the Messiah and a little bit about the period leading up to his coming. In the next installment G-d willing (if the Messiah hasn't arrived by then...), I will discuss the final stage of the world and finally attempt to put the entire picture together. Stay tuned!

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