

## Mashiah — Not Now, Not Ever

David Lazar

I remember exactly where I was and what I was looking at twenty years ago as a settler in the Gaza Strip when I said to myself, “*Baruch Hashem* that we believe in *mashiah*, the messiah.” I was parked at the bus stop outside of the settlement that I had helped found, waiting for my wife, when a crowd of teenagers from the nearby refugee camp walked by. Sitting in my brand new Ford Escort, I could see the hate in their eyes. I saw in their eyes the reflection of what they saw — new cars and tractors, state of the art hothouses, large comfortable homes, plentiful water and supplies — all for these Jews who, even if born in Israel, originally had come from other lands. They, on the other hand, whose ancestors had inhabited this part of the Middle East for centuries, traveled by foot, maybe in donkey-drawn carts, and less frequently in ancient Peugeot station wagons. They lived in crumbling and crowded refugee camps, and looked toward a life of poverty — either working for the Jews in their fields, hotels, and garages, or scratching a meager existence out of the over-worked, under-irrigated fields close to home. While I remember feeling uncomfortable, even guilty, confronted with that hate, I knew that we had a God-given right to live and work that land. It was clear to me then that, since we were unable to solve this problem on our own, we were in need of a flesh-and-blood king who would lead us to victory over our Arab neighbors. That was what I had been taught in the *yeshiva* and that was the belief I hung onto in trying to deal with this dilemma. It was just a question of holding on long enough and making ourselves worthy of his coming.

It took me years — the critical study of Judaism, serving in Ramalah and Hevron during the first Intifada, and just plain growing up — to peel away the layers of naiveté that had surrounded me during my teen and early adult years in religious Zionist circles. But I finally realized that the messiah concept was, at the end of the 20th century, a dangerous form of fascism wielding control over Israeli politics.

There is, of course, no excuse for suicide bombers, mortar attacks, or sniper fire. There is much evil and antisemitism at work in motivating those Palestinians

who are responsible for much of what has happened over the past eighteen months. But there is little doubt in my mind that, as Israelis, we brought much of this upon ourselves. We neglected to really look into their eyes and try to see how they see us. We failed to perceive their tears of poverty and pain and create contemporary solutions for a contemporary challenge. At best, we shrugged our shoulders and resigned ourselves, as we had for centuries, to wait for the messiah to solve our problems.

I realize that wanting the messiah was essential for the survival of Jews throughout the ages, providing hope for a persecuted people that, until the 20th century, possessed little or no political power. But we do have political power today. We don't need a flesh-and-blood king to lead us into battle — we have the military edge of a viable modern-day democratic state. It is in this liberated state that we are strong enough to internalize the message of *yetziat mitzraim* at Pesach and

help our Palestinian neighbors find their own freedom. It is in this enlightened state that we are bold enough to utilize the message of ongoing revelation at Shavuot and move beyond antiquated and dangerous biblical concepts. And it is in this not indestructible state that we must take seriously the lessons of wandering in the desert at Sukkot — guarding against our own hubris.

I am not suggesting, as do some post-Zionists, that we give up on the idea of a Jewish State. There is, in the end, yet one place on this earth where all Jews can find refuge, where Hebrew culture can be renewed and thrive, and where the great experiment can be held in which Judaism and democracy serve as the basis for a just and compassionate society.

But we would do well in the 21st century to look less toward the horizon for the messiah, and more into the eyes of those around us, here and now.

*Rabbi David Lazar lives and teaches in Jerusalem. He is Director of RIKMA: Spiritual Community Leadership Training and serves as chaplain for the Israel AIDS Task Force. He was a founding member of Moshav Gan-Or.*

---

*I finally realized that the messiah concept is a dangerous form of fascism wielding control over Israeli politics.*

---