

Chapter 1:

What is Moshiach?

One need not be a particularly astute observer to notice that the world is full of personal and communal tragedy. There are many people whose lives are filled with difficulties and history tells us of the seemingly continuous travails of the Jewish people. At the time of this writing, Jews all over the world and particularly in Israel are in distinct danger. Is this the best G-d could do?

Certainly not. This world is not intended to be one of simplicity and serenity. However, there will be a time when this will be the case. We have been promised in the Torah and by the prophets that there will be a time of worldwide peace and tranquility. A time when war will cease and humanity will gather together to worship G-d in unity. This is called Yemos HaMoshiach – the Messianic Era. The prophets gave us much information about the events leading up to and during Yemos HaMoshiach, as did the sages of the Talmud. However, there are a number of points that are unclear. The exact chronology of events – what will happen first – are sometimes a matter of debate. We will attempt to

present a basic outline of the events, with full knowledge that it is not inclusive of every opinion.

Gog and Magog

Yechezkel tells us in chapters 38 and 39 about a battle that will occur in Israel between the forces of Gog, king of Magog, and the Jewish people. This will be a terrible war and, at first, the Jews will lose many battles. But not only the people of Magog will wage this war against Israel; many nations of the world, even enemies, will join together in this effort. Yechezkel 38:5-6 lists the nations of Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Assyria. Tehillim 83:7-9 adds Edom, Ishmael, Moav, Hagarim, Geval, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre, and Assyria. Exactly to whom these nations currently refer is unknown but they seem to represent the nations ranging from North Africa to the Mediterranean and across the Middle East. While it is tempting to speculate about the identity of this conglomerate of nations, particularly while listening to news reports about Arab League summits, we will not try guessing regarding such an important topic.

The effects of this united battle against Jerusalem will be very serious. Daniel 12:1 describes it as “a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence.” After two unsuccessful attempts to capture Jerusalem the enemy will finally succeed in a devastating way. “I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses looted and the women raped; half the city shall go into exile...” (Zechariah

14:2; cf. Malbim). During this period the leader of the Jewish people will be killed. Who is this leader?

Moshiach ben Yosef

Rav Saadia Gaon in his *Emunos VeDeyos* 8:5 tells us that Moshiach ben Yosef will be from the Galilee, as Rabbi Yochanan says in *Rosh HaShanah* 31b – “From there [Tiberias] redemption will begin.” Moshiach ben Yosef will be a descendant of Yosef who will ascend to the military leadership of the Jewish people and will gather an army to fully conquer Jerusalem before the war of Gog and Magog. This original capture of Jerusalem is referred to in *Ovadia* 1:21 – “The saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Eisav.” Similarly, an earlier verse (1:18) says “The house of Yaakov shall be a fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav stubble; they shall burn them and consume them.”

However, when Gog and his allies subsequently battle against Jerusalem they will kill Moshiach ben Yosef. *Zechariah* 12:10 says “They shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.” This defeat will be crushing in both a physical and emotional sense. The devastation over the loss of this leader will be widespread as the *Gemara* in *Sukkah* 52b tells us. While, as the *Maharsha* there points out, the redemption at that time will not yet be complete. The final redeemer – Moshiach ben David – will appear soon after.

Moshiach ben David

Literally, Moshiach means someone who has been anointed. It is used in Tanach to refer to a number of people including priests, kings, and even the Persian king Koresh (in Yishayahu 45:1). But when the Jews speak of Moshiach they generally mean the royal descendant of David who will lead the Jewish people, and indeed the whole world, into Yemos HaMoshiach.

Some time after Moshiach ben Yosef is killed, Eliyahu the prophet will come to tell the world that Moshiach (ben David) will imminently arrive. The Gemara in Eirubin 43b says that Moshiach cannot come on Shabbos or Yom Tov because that means that Eliyahu would have to come on the day before; the Jewish people were promised that Eliyahu will not come on those days and interfere with the Shabbos and holiday preparations. In other words, Eliyahu will come at least one day before Moshiach.

Moshiach will be a wise and charismatic man. He will be a brilliant scholar and a great prophet, inspired in all his endeavors. With these talents and divine assistance he will bring about Yemos HaMoshiach. After recapturing Jerusalem, he will rule as a king over Israel. But his wisdom will be so widely recognized that all people – both Jew and non-Jew – will look to him for guidance. The miracles that occur at this time will bring the entire world to appreciate G-d and His plan for humanity.

This will lead to world peace. “He [Moshiach] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Yishayahu 2:4).

Yishayahu further describes Moshiach as follows:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Yishai, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

ויצא חטר מגזע ישי ונצר
משרשיו יפרה. ונחה עליו
רוח ידוד רוח חכמה ובינה
רוח עצה וגבורה רוח
דעת ויראת ידוד. והריחו
ביראת ידוד ולא למראה
עיניו ישפוט ולא למשמע
אזניו יוכיח. ושפט בצדק
דלים והוכיח במישור לענוי
ארץ והכה ארץ בשבט פיו
וברוח שפתיו ימית רשע.
והיה צדק אזור מתניו
והאמונה אזור חלציו.

(Yishayahu 11:1-5)

Jews from all over the world will return to the land of Israel. Indeed, non-Jews will kindly assist Jews in returning. The righteous Jews of the past will be resurrected to enjoy this spiritual period in history. The Temple will also be returned and the sacrificial service reestablished. All this will happen during the reign of Moshiach.

However, as we said above, the chronology of these events is not entirely clear. For example, Rambam says that resurrection might happen before Moshiach's appearance or long after (Maamar T'chiyas HaMeisim, ed. Kafah p. 86). Additionally, there is the possibility that some of the above events will not occur.

Two Ways for Moshiach to Come

R' Alexandri said: R' Yehoshua ben Levy said: It says "In its time" and "I will hasten it" (Yishayahu 60:22). If [Israel] merits, I will hasten it. If not, in its time... It says "Behold! With the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13) and "A humble man riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). If [Israel] merits, with the clouds of heaven. If not, a humble man riding on a donkey.

אמר רבי אלכסנדר רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי כתיב בעתה וכתיב אחישנה. זכו אחישנה לא זכו בעתה... כתיב וארו עם ענני שמיא וכתיב עני ורכב על חמור. זכו עם ענני שמיא לא זכו עני ורכב על חמור.

(Sanhedrin 98a)

The Gemara points out contradictory descriptions of the time and nature of Moshiach's arrival. To explain this discrepancy, the Gemara utilizes an important concept. G-d has planned out world history and established a predetermined time when Moshiach will come. However, if the entire Jewish people repent and become righteous then Moshiach will come immediately and triumphantly, even in advance of the predetermined time. This concept is advanced by the rabbis. Rav Saadia Gaon (Emunos VeDeyos 8:6) says that if the Jewish people repent then Moshiach ben Yosef will not come. Rather, Moshiach (ben David) will immediately come. Similarly, Rav Yonason Eybeshutz in his Kreisi uPleisi (end of 110) writes that this applies to Eliyahu as well. If the Jewish people repent then, without prior announcement, Moshiach will immediately inaugurate Yemos Hamoshiach – may it happen speedily in our day.

Thus, the buildup until the coming of Moshiach is part of the natural order of events that G-d has programmed into history. All else being equal, the world will proceed through a slow process of war and upheaval, including the drama of Moshiach ben Yosef's victory and defeat, leading up to Yemos HaMoshiach. However, the Jewish people have the ability to bypass the natural order of history by returning to G-d with all of their heart. If they accomplish this then history is stopped mid-course and ended. Immediately, G-d will miraculously change history and reveal Moshiach, who will inaugurate the new world order. Because this is a

deviation from history, it must be miraculous and immediate. However, the normal course of history that leads to Moshiach in his time need not be miraculous because it is part of G-d's plan in nature.

What this implies, and what is said explicitly by R' Ovadiah Bartenura in his commentary on Rus (in the back of the standard Mikraos Gedolos on Bamidbar) and others, is that every generation has a *potential Moshiach* who, if and when the generation should merit it, will immediately become the *actual Moshiach*. For example, it is claimed by many that the Arizal was the potential Moshiach of his generation and, if every Jew had truly repented and become righteous, he would have immediately been crowned by G-d as the King Moshiach and initiated Yemos HaMoshiach. Because this would have been a coming of the Moshiach that was merited, there would have been no need for Moshiach ben Yosef and Eliyahu to precede Moshiach (ben David). Rather, the Arizal would have become the Moshiach immediately and miraculously.

Similarly, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 98a tells us that R' Yehoshua ben Levy met Eliyahu near the entrance to the tomb of R' Shimon ben Yochai. R' Yehoshua ben Levy asked when Moshiach will come and Eliyahu told him to ask Moshiach, who lives near Rome. R' Yehoshua ben Levy went to Rome and asked Moshiach when he will come and Moshiach responded, "Today". R' Yehoshua ben Levy told this to Eliyahu who explained that Moshiach meant, "Today – if you listen to His voice" (Tehillim 95:7). Based on what

we said above, this is perfectly understandable. The Moshiach with whom R' Yehoshua ben Levy spoke was the potential Moshiach of that generation. Had the generation repented and merited immediate redemption then he would have been Moshiach. Now, almost 2000 years later, that man is no longer alive and is not Moshiach. However, then he was because he was the potential Moshiach of his time.

As is probably evident by now, this concept of a potential Moshiach in every generation will become very important in our later discussions.

When Will Moshiach Come?

As we said above, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 98a says that there are two times when Moshiach can come. If we merit Yemos HaMoshiach, if the Jewish people is entirely righteous, then Moshiach can come at any time. Otherwise, there is a set time for Moshiach to come. There are many hints in the Bible that enable us to calculate exactly when this set time will be however the biblical references are often obscure. It is frequently difficult to decipher their precise meaning.

In Sanhedrin 97a we are told in very strong terms that it is improper to calculate the year of Moshiach's arrival because if one is wrong, and that time comes and passes without Moshiach coming, then some people will stop believing in Moshiach.

However, we find that the greatest among our sages did just that. For example, Rashi in his commentary to Daniel 7:25 calculated that Moshiach would come in the year 1405. Ramban in his commentary to B'reishis 2:3 calculated that he would come in 1357. Rav Saadia Gaon in his Emunos VeDeyos (8:3) said it would be in the year 980. Rambam, in his Iggeres Teiman (ch. 3 p. 41), wrote that a tradition in his family held it would be in the year 1210. More recently, the Chasam Sofer (Tshuvos, 6:61) calculated that Moshiach would arrive in 1890 and Malbim (Daniel 12:11-12) calculated 1925. All of these years passed and Moshiach did not come. Why these great scholars were permitted to calculate the year of the coming of Moshiach is for another time. However, we can say with certainty that we do not know when Moshiach will come. We just hope it is soon.

Even in the times of the Gemara they lived with a constant anticipation of the Moshiach. In Avodah Zarah 9b, Rabbi Chanina says that subsequent to 400 years after the Churban one should not buy a field in Israel because when Moshiach comes the field will return to its tribal owner. Similarly, in Eiruvim 43a we are taught that someone who vows to be a Nazir starting on the day that Moshiach comes is forbidden to drink wine like a Nazir on regular days just in case Moshiach has come on that day.

Due to the long and difficult exile, scarcely a century has gone by in which people have not thought that they were experiencing the “birth pangs of Moshiach” – the suffering that will precede his revelation. The massacres in Spain

during the 15th century leading up to the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492 was widely seen as a sign that Moshiach's arrival was imminent. The devastating pogroms of 1648-9 (Tach VeTat) that so disrupted Jewish settlements in Eastern Europe were also seen as sure signs that Moshiach was on his way. Unfortunately, their hopes for Yemos HaMoshiach did not come true in their day.

May it come soon in our time!