

# RABBINIC ADVICE IN A CONFUSED AGE

A MESSAGE FROM  
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## PREFACE

In response to the ever-increasing interest in the issue of “Who is Moshiach?,” Rabbi Yosef Avraham HaLevi Heller – a “*Chasidishe Rav, Moreh Ho’ra’ah be-Po’al*” - has submitted the following letter written to a friend for dissemination. Although the letter was written in 5755/1995 (shortly after the Rebbe’s *histalkus*) in response to an individual, Rabbi Heller has - in the light of the recent international uproar regarding this matter - deemed it appropriate to publicise the letter so as to make it available to all members of *Anash* who seek guidance in this area. The letter has been made available in Hebrew and a free English rendition of the main part of the letter is set out below.

Many of the Rebbe’s *Shluchim* across the globe are graduates of the *Kollel Avreichim* that the Rebbe founded and appointed Rabbi Heller at its helm. Some of the senior Lubavitch Rabbonim in this country were personally trained for their *Avodas ha-Kodesh* by Rabbi Heller. Many benefited, and continue to benefit, from his halachic advice and expert guidance in all areas of life. I trust that this short but concise piece will help illuminate the eyes of many members of *Anash* who have a sincere desire to be guided on this issue. Whilst the letter does not engage in debate, argumentation and counter-argumentation with other prevalent views, it expresses an authoritative opinion in a clear, persuasive and comprehensive manner. Rabbi Heller’s sagely advice on these issues will undoubtedly provide many of us with a philosophical and pragmatic framework within which to operate, one which is based on the annals of *halachah* and the teachings of *Toras HaChasidus*.

May the Almighty grant peace within the family of Lubavitch Chasidim and between all Jewish People. May we be *zocheh* to the *ge’ulah ha-amitis ve-hasheleimah be-karov mamash*.

Brooklyn, New York  
Sivan 5762/May 2002

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To my dear friend...  
Boro Park,  
New York.

Greeting and blessing....

I write in response to your query, regarding various aspects of belief in the coming of Moshiach, in the light of the recent controversy and the various views that have been aired with great fanfare in the public arena.

Before I approach the essence of the matter, I deem it necessary to make a number of crucial introductory remarks....

### **Avoiding Strife-provoking and Ridicule-inviting Behaviour**

It is of paramount importance to avoid the slightest manifestation of disunity amongst the Jewish People, G-d Forbid. This concern assumes a greater dimension with regard to disputes that are [allegedly] conducted “for the sake of Heaven” (*machlokes leshem shamayim*). Regarding these disputes the Alter Rebbe writes: “The majority of troubles and tribulations that we experience come as a result of arguments for the sake of Heaven [!], may the All-Merciful One save us from such”. One must therefore exercise great caution before entering into the fray of controversy...even for the most noble purposes.

... Regarding the responsive declaration (in *Kaddish*): “*Amen, Yehei Shemei Rabba....*” the Alter Rebbe (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 56:2*) writes as follows: “One should recite this in a loud voice, for the sound of this voice breaks all the accusers and nullifies all harsh decrees. Nevertheless, one should not say this too loud, in order that people should not ridicule him with the result that he would be causing them to sin”.

We see that even a declaration that is specifically supposed to be recited in a loud voice, and the very nullification of harsh decrees against the Jewish People depends on such a loud voice, nevertheless, it is forbidden to do so in a manner that will cause other people to mock him. To be certain, one who ridicules is indeed a sinner. Moreover at the beginning of *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* it states explicitly that one should not be put off from the service of G-d because people mock him. Nevertheless, to as great an extent as possible one must endeavour not to cause people

to ridicule him, for in doing so he will caused them to sin, thereby ensuring that his gain has been outweighed by his loss, G-d Forbid.

In the *Mishnah*, we find a more far-reaching concern. The *Mishnah* (*Parah* 3:3) describes the meticulous procedure that was employed in the preparation of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer used for the purposes of purifying those who had become contaminated by coming in contact with a human corpse). Rabbi Yose objected to one of these *hiddurim*. He said: “*al titnu makom la-tzidokim lirdos*” (“Do not provide an opportunity for the Sadducees to rebel”, by giving them the opportunity to ridicule and mock the Sages). The implication of this teaching is that one must not to provide an opportunity for **heretics** to undermine the standing of observant Jews, even when that may sometimes be at the expense of a *hiddur mitzvah* or another praiseworthy practice. How much more so, therefore, ought one to be careful that observant and G-d-fearing Jews in our locale or even in distant places not become engulfed in mockery, misery, fissures and antagonism. May the Almighty save us from all this.

### **A Halachic Ruling: We Do not Know Who will be Moshiach!**

It is axiomatic that almost every area (*sugya*) of Torah study is fraught with debate and complexity. It would not be an over-statement to suggest that almost every teaching of the *Gemara* can be questioned based on another teaching of the *Gemara* elsewhere. The classical commentaries of the *Rishonim* such as the commentaries of the *Tosafos* are designed to resolve these problems and reconcile the contradictions. Similarly there are many laws codified in the *Shulchan Aruch* that seem to be in contradiction with other sources. Once again the classical commentaries [*Shach*, *Taz*, *Magen Avraham* etc] shed light on the halachic issues by qualifying the meaning of terms, elucidating the meaning of the texts and synthesising the apparently contradictory sources, thereby yielding (for the competent *posek*) a clear halachic verdict. Without these authoritative works we would certainly be left in the dark, not being able to come to any halachic conclusions in even one area of Talmudic Law. The same is true with regard to the teachings of *pnimiyus HaTorah* (the sacred *Zohar*, the Writings of the *Arizal* etc). Many *sefarim* have been written to explain and synthesize the various teachings of these mystical sources. For example the *Kuntres Acharon* – published as the last part of the Alter Rebbe’s *Tanya* – is described by the Alter Rebbe’s sons as a work containing “in-depth analysis of teachings of the *Zohar*, *Etz Chayim* and *Pri Etz Chayim* that appear to contradict each other. With his [the Alter Rebbe’s] spirit of understanding he explains each statement in its context”. Once again, without these and similar works no eminent Torah Scholar would presume to make any authoritative statements on mystical matters such as those expounded upon in the Kabbalah.

Yet when we study the section of the Torah that discusses the advent of the Moshiach – as recorded in the Scriptures, in the teachings of our Sages of blessed memory and other holy works – we confront an anomaly. The Rambam (*Hilchos Melachim* Chapter 12, Section 2) writes:

“... There are some Sages who say that Eliyahu’s coming will precede the coming of the Moshiach. All these **and similar matters** cannot [definitely] be known by man until they occur, **for these matters are undefined in the Prophets’ [words], and even the Sages have no established tradition regarding these matters**, but only

[their own] interpretation of the verses. Therefore, there is a controversy among them regarding these matters.

“Regardless [of the debate concerning these questions] neither the order or the occurrence of these events, nor their precise detail, are among the fundamental principles of the faith. A person should not pre-occupy himself with the *Aggados* and homiletics concerning these and similar matters, nor should he consider them as essentials, for [study of] them will neither bring fear nor love [of G-d]”.

The Rambam’s position is unequivocal: the Torah sources on the topic of Moshiach are obscure (“hidden”) and will remain so until the coming of the Redeemer. Therefore, the search for certainty in all such matters is doomed to failure. The prophetic verses, teachings of *Chazal*, the *Arizal*, Chassidic Discourses, *Sichos* and *Ma’amarim* etc. that seem to predict a particular picture of the events of the End of Days are usually paralleled with alternative teachings in the same sources that yield an entirely different portrait of the *acharis ha-yamim*. Moreover, it is difficult to know whether any given statement of *Chazal* or verse in Scriptures or ‘forecast’ in the *Ma’amarim* and *Sichos* and other holy sources is to be understood literally or figuratively. As the *Rambam* writes there (*Hilchos Melachim* 12:1): “Though Yeshayah (11:6) states: ‘The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat,’ these [words] are a metaphor and a parable ... similarly, other messianic prophecies of this nature are metaphors. In the Messianic Era, everyone will realise which matters were implied by these metaphors and which allusions they contained.”

Unlike other areas of Torah, and despite the abundance of teachings on aspects of Moshiach and Ge’ulah, we do not have any classical **halachic authorities** – such as the *Shach*, *Taz*, *Magen Avraham* and the like – who explain, clarify and elucidate these matters. Consequently, it is not possible to reach any definitive decisions or make dogmatic claims regarding any of these matters. All the sources are holy and true, and whilst tentative suggestions may be made as to their exact meaning, it is over-presumptuous in the extreme to make any definite claims or issue any firm edicts based on these sources.

In the light of all the above, the proliferating phenomenon, whereby all and sundry are offering views and predictions on the obscure details of the redemption and the persona of Moshiach, is both ironical and bizarre. How can people who would not rely on their own judgement to reach a correct conclusion regarding a simple halachic issue in every day life, become ‘universal authorities’ on Moshiach matters?

### “Who is Moshiach?” – A Vain Speculation

At first glance, however, one aspect of the above-mentioned teaching of the Rambam is most perplexing. The Rambam writes: “... A person should not pre-occupy himself with the *Aggados* and homiletics concerning these and similar matters, nor should he consider them as essentials, for [study of] them will neither bring fear nor love [of G-d]”. This clause requires explanation. Surely, every Jew is obliged to study all aspects of the Torah as the Halachic authorities rule in *Hilchos Talmud Torah*? Surely the Scriptures and Sayings of *Chazal* pertaining to Moshiach are also part of the Torah!? What is the meaning of the Rambam’s ruling, not to become pre-occupied with in-

depth study of these matters? Similarly, all that which the later Rabbis introduced (such as the writings of the *Arizal*, the discourses and *Sichos* of our saintly Rebbes, and all other sacred works) were “given to Moshe Rabbeinu on Mount Sinai.” Why does the obligation to study Torah not demand that we exert every possible effort in order to understand the profundity of these teachings? Moreover, how is it possible to suggest that any given section of the Torah does not have the ability to inspire and instil the love and fear of G-d?

The answer may be as follows. The duty to study each part of the Torah has its particular purpose or ‘focal point’. The halachic section of the Torah, that which governs one’s daily conduct, must be studied [primarily] in order to know “the deed that must be done” with all its multi-faceted minutiae (*be-chol perateha ve-dikdukeha*). On the other hand, the Aggadic and Midrashic portions of the Torah are supposed to be studied primarily [not in order to reach any categorical definitions and facilitate prediction of forthcoming events, rather] in order to imbue us with faith and trust in G-d; to infuse us with the love and fear of G-d, and to instil in us the requisite feelings and characteristics so that we may serve G-d with devotion and joy. The same is true regarding the study of those aspects of the Torah that address the future redemption and the details of Moshiach. Since these are matters of the future, and as mentioned it is anyway impossible to reach any precise practical conclusions as to how these events will unfold, the study of *inyanei Moshiach U-Ge’ulah* is not intended to be a study of *halachah le-ma’aseh* (in the conventional sense of the term). Rather the primary function of this study is to fortify one’s faith in the coming of Moshiach and the constant anticipation for his arrival. This hope, trust and constant yearning for the redemption, fortified by the study of *Inyanei Ge’ulah* will then become manifest in personal preparation for the redemption, through Torah study and total dedication to the service of G-d Almighty, in a spirit of confidence and true joy.

Since the function of such study is not to determine the details of exactly how and through whom the events will take place, the Rambam writes that “a person should not pre-occupy himself” with these matters. Namely he should not confuse the details with the essentials; [the **essential** (*ikkar*) of belief in the redemption Moshiach ben Dovid and anticipation for Divine Salvation **is** absolutely clear and **is** a ‘constant pre-occupation’ of every Jew, the **details** are obscure and ultimately unfathomable]. Since the purpose of such study is not for *paskening halachah le-maaseh* (issuing halachic edicts) but instead to internalise one’s faith, hope and anticipation, there is simply no need or valid reason to scrutinise and endeavour to establish the details firmly and dogmatically (“...*yisasek... ya’arich... yesimem ikkar*”), for such endeavours “will neither bring fear nor love [of G-d]”.

The same is true with regard to the identity of Moshiach. **What difference does it make whether the Moshiach will be Moshe Rabbeinu (“the first Redeemer is the last Redeemer”) or King David (“David King of Israel is alive and enduring”) or the soul of both of them together (as some sources suggest) or whether the personhood of Moshiach will be totally unexpected (for the advent of Moshiach involves aspects that transcend our grasp completely)? Will the knowledge of these details increase our love and fear of G-d?**

The main thing is to know that in the Time to Come, after the resurrection of the dead etc, we will be reunited with the Patriarchs, Moshe and Aharon, King David etc, all the Tannaic and Amoraic sages etc, and all our saintly Rebbes together with the righteous of all the generations and we will study Moshiach's Torah. Everything will then be perfectly good without any deficiency whatsoever. We will not be left with any questions or mysteries. **What practical relevance does it have now to know, with exact detail, how this will all take place?**

Therefore, my friend, I advise you to abstain from entering into the fray and expressing any view in the "Who is Moshiach?" debate. For there are many other areas of Torah study and the service of G-d which **everyone** acknowledges will enhance the love and fear of G-d. There are sufficient areas of benevolence and kindness (*gemilus chasadim*) that **everyone** agrees will bring the Jewish People closer to their Father in Heaven and generate true love for one's fellow Jew. This is particularly pertinent, for as it is well-known, gratuitous love for one's fellow Jew is the antidote to baseless hatred, the matter that lies at the very root of our present exile. For unfortunately, as a result of our many sins, *Sinas Chinam* is still the cause of our prolonged exile. May the Almighty save us from both the cause and the effect, speedily in our days.

I thus conclude with an abundance of blessing and with loyal friendship.

*Yosef Avraham HaLevi Heller*

P.S. I am well aware that there will undoubtedly be many who will disagree with all the above. Moreover, they will present numerous logical arguments to refute every nuance of my reasoning. Yet, this letter is not intended to convince anyone (let alone win him over in a debate). Rather, I have written to you alone, since you requested to know my opinion on these matters, based on the authentic teachings of our sacred Torah - the Torah of truth - whose ways are ways of pleasantness and whose paths are paths of peace. A Dayan can only judge a case in accordance with his understanding.