



ADDRESS TO ST NICHOLAS OF MYRA'S CHURCH: A MESSIANIC AGE

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Sunday 3 December 2023

1 An ultra-Orthodox Jewish organisation in Jerusalem hands out pocket-sized card reminding Jews of what prayers to say on the arrival of the Messiah.ⁱ After all, there's nothing worse than the Messiah arriving and being unsure of exactly what blessings are prescribed by Jewish law.

2 There's a blessing for "[w]hen we first hear from a reliable source" of the Messiah's coming. There's a blessing for "[w]hen one sees the rebuilt [Third Temple]". There's a blessing for when we actually see the Messiah in person. And, best of all, there's a blessing for "[i]f you are sharing this card with someone who came back from the dead".ⁱⁱ Because, again, there's nothing worse than being resurrected and not having your prayerbook to hand.

3 Lest you think that Jewish preparation for the Messiah is entirely in the world of spirituality, fear not. There are also practical arrangements in place. When Jenna Rose Alpern, an American, moved to Israel in 2014, she signed a lease on an apartment which contained an unusual stipulation: "*Upon the coming of the messiah, tenants agree to vacate the apartment within 15 days.*"ⁱⁱⁱ In a blog post about her experience, she explained that "[t]he owners of the property live in America and apparently want to make sure they have a place in the holy city upon the arrival of the Messiah".^{iv} It turns out that these 'Messiah clauses' are actually not unusual in Israeli property law.^v

ⁱ Geulah Now (undated): <<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/3541bd6a-6d9e-49b7-a14d-79312fce3ba5/downloads/back.pdf>>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jenna Rose Alpern, "A rental contract for the End of Days", *Times of Israel* (10 February 2014): <<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/only-in-israel/>>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

4 But then Jenna Rose Alpern asked a good question: “[W]hat does this say about the landlords? That their first act of [a] messianic era will be to evict their tenants so they have a place for themselves?”^{vi}

5 In fact, waiting passively for the Messiah to arrive – waiting in Boston or Brooklyn and extracting rent from people living in Israel – intent on, as soon as the world is perfected, wielding power over the vulnerable, throwing tenants out onto the street, and bathing in the glory of an age of new spirituality... that isn’t a proper Jewish approach at all.

6 You’ll notice that I’m actually using two different phrases. ‘Messiah’ and ‘messianic age’. These terms are actually not quite interchangeable, and they represent the different approaches of different denominations of Judaism. Orthodox Jews still yearn for the arrival of a ‘personal’ Messiah: one individual who will materialise at an unexpected moment yet to be determined. Progressive Jews like myself, on the other hand, are less attached to the idea of a personal Messiah, and instead look forward to a messianic age: a time when the world will be perfected, when the lion will lie with the lamb, etc etc.^{vii}

7 Both approaches find some support in the words of the great 12th-century rabbi Maimonides:^{viii}

In that time, there will be no famine and no war, no jealousy and no rivalry. Good will overflow, and dainties and delights will [cover the earth] like dust. The sole occupation of all the world will be to know God.

In other words, there will be little or no supernatural ‘stuff’ happening.^{ix} Maimonides doesn’t promise an end to disease or death or dementia. Natural phenomena are natural phenomena. What will be perfect about the world to come is the complete absence of human ills.

8 And the crucial thing about human ills is that we don’t need to wait for them to be stopped. We can stop them, at any time of our choosing.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} To misquote Isaiah 65:25

^{viii} Hilchot M’lachim 12:5

^{ix} Cf Hilchot M’lachim 12:1



9 That, ultimately, is the mission of Jews and the mission of Judaism: building a messianic age. Progressive Jews may view that as an end in itself, while Orthodox Jews may understand themselves to be paving a way for a personal Messiah whose arrival will herald the actual moment at which perfection is achieved. But, either way, the ‘in the meantime’ task is there.

10 And where do we get our guidance for this task? From the Torah, the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Torah – which Jews construe very broadly, not just referring to the written words in the Five Books of Moses, but to the whole canon of interpretation and understanding that arises from them – tells us that a justice system isn’t fair if one of the parties is dressed in luxurious clothes while the other is in paupers’ rags.^x It tells us that important social issues should be decided by vote.^{xi} It tells us that people should be able to live wherever in the world they want to.^{xii} It tells us that healthcare should be accessible to all and that nobody should profit from providing it.^{xiii}

11 None of those lines appears in the biblical text itself. All of them were arrived at by a process of rabbinic interpretation. To illustrate that, allow me to share with you a story^{xiv} from the Talmud, a 5th-century compendium of Jewish law and legend.

12 There were five rabbis debating an obscure point of Jewish law. Four of them ruled one way, and one, Rabbi Eliezer, ruled the other. He became more and more frustrated at the four-against-one deadlock, until he said: *“If I’m right, let that carob tree over there jump 400 cubits that way.”* And it did! But the other rabbis said: *“We do not decide the law by carob trees, but by logic.”* Then Rabbi Eliezer said: *“If I’m right, let that river start flowing the other way.”* And it did! But the others said: *“We do not decide the law by rivers, but by logic.”* Then Rabbi Eliezer said, somewhat unwisely: *“If I’m right, let the walls of this building collapse.”* And the walls began buckling, until the other rabbis rebuked them, saying: *“Why are you walls interfering in a scholarly discussion?”* Finally, Rabbi Eliezer cried out: *“If I’m right, let God’s voice*

^x Hilchot Sanhedrin 21:2

^{xi} See eg Rema to Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 163:1

^{xii} b.Rosh Hashanah 9b (and Rashi *ad loc*)

^{xiii} Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 336:3

^{xiv} This is my reinterpretation of b.Bava Metzia 59b



confirm it.” And sure enough, the Divine Voice boomed: “*Rabbi Eliezer is correct and you should rule in accordance with him.*” What did the other rabbis say? “*OK, now it’s four against two.*”

13 They justified their intransigence by quoting a verse from Deuteronomy: “*The Torah is not in heaven.*”^{xv} In context, that verse means that people have no excuse for failing to learn and adhere to the Torah, because it’s accessible and easy to find. But the rabbis used it to mean that God’s authority over the biblical text ended the moment it was revealed to humanity. From then on, it became a human-owned document, and we are free to interpret and re-interpret it to fulfil the differing needs of each moment.

14 So we have these beautiful ethical teachings, derived, however indirectly, from the Torah. Of course, the world still falls far short of many of them – the Jewish world included. But armed with our Torah, the Jews have gone out into the world with at least a blueprint of how to get humanity to the next point on its journey. And if you can find time, before making your journeys later today, to stay and hear more – and see one of the antique Torah scrolls our synagogue brings to life on a weekly basis – that would be fantastic too. Thank you for having me!

^{xv} Deuteronomy 30:12

