**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

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**We mourn the sudden passing of our dear friend and supporter**

**Mr. Joshua Mermelstein z"l  
and extend our deepest sympathies to his mother,  
his wife Beth, and his children Avi, Jesse and Jonah.  
May the family know no more sorrow.**  
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**Shiur #18:**

**Shabbetai Tzvi**

**The False Mashiach**

**(1666)**

Following the trauma of the Khmelnytsky Massacres, a new and very different type of challenge confronted the Jewish world.

Rumors spread around the Jewish communities that the Jewish messiah (*mashiach*) had appeared, and salvation was imminent. We are referring of course to Shabbetai Tzvi, the false *mashiach* who convinced thousands that he was “the one,” the promised king who would bring about the final redemption.

Shabbetai Tzvi was born in 1626 in Izmir, Turkey. During his life, he declared himself the *mashiach,* sent by God to redeem the Jewish people. Shabbetai, a mystic, was well-read in *Zohar* and other kabbalist writings and he claimed to be able to perform miracles and communicate with God. He practiced bizarre purification exercises which he called *tikkunim*. Together with his wife Sara, who survived the Khmelnytsky Massacre, and with the aid of his “prophet” Natan of Aza, he convinced Jews around the world, including many leading rabbis, that he was indeed the *mashiach*. Stories about these so-called miracles spread around the communities, and plans to relocate to the Land of Israel were made.

Shabbetai and his followers practiced provocative customs, even creating a new blessing, “Blessed are You… Who permits the forbidden.”

Without question, the horrific and traumatic atmosphere created by the massacres produced great hopes and expectations for salvation and redemption.

When news of this messianic behavior reached the Turkish authorities, they were very concerned. Shabbetai was imprisoned and was offered the choice of being killed or [converting to Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced_conversion). He chose to convert. This was a traumatic decision for most of his followers because he had raised such hope in the Jewish communities that redemption was near. Although there were those who continued to believe in him, the vast majority rejected his teachings and became very disillusioned.

**Types of *mashiach***

In Jewish history, there have been several charismatic characters who raised hopes that they were the ones who would bring salvation and end all Jewish suffering. The Rambam mentions the belief of Rabbi Akiva that Bar Kokhba (Shimon bar Koziba) was the *mashiach*:

Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest sages of the Mishna, was one of the supporters of King bar Koziba and would describe him as the messianic king. He and all the Sages of his generation considered him to be the messianic king until he was killed because of sins. Once he was killed, they realized that he was not the messiah.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Rambam does not criticize the rabbis of the Bar Kokhba period; rather, he seems to legitimize their beliefs and even proves from this historic saga the following:

One should not presume that the messianic king must work miracles and wonders, bring about new phenomena in the world, resurrect the dead, or perform other similar deeds. This is definitely not true…[[2]](#footnote-2)

Was the belief of thousands of Jews and leading rabbis in Shabbetai Tzvi similarly legitimate?

Rav Yaakov Emden categorizes the different groups of false messiahs up to his time. He differentiates between Bar Kokhba and Shabbetai Tzvi.[[3]](#footnote-3) While Bar Kokhba’s intentions were good and he did not contradict the Torah and its laws, Shabbetai Tzvi and his followers were corrupted by sin and led the people astray.

Still, is the belief in the coming of the Messiah a belief accepted by all?[[4]](#footnote-4)

***Ani Ma'amin***

The Rambam created a list of principles of faith.[[5]](#footnote-5) The list has been recapitulated in popular form, from the short prose list of *Ani Ma’amin* to the famous poem of *Yigdal*, both found in standard prayer-books. The Rambam holds that anyone who does not believe in any of the thirteen principles of his doctrine is a heretic and does not have a place in the World to Come.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The penultimate principle reads as follows:

The twelfth principle concerns the Messianic Era. One must believe and affirm that the Messiah will come. One should not think he is detained. [Rather,] "If he should tarry, await him" (*Chavakuk* 2:3).

However, there seems to be a disagreement on this matter. The Gemara records the opinion of a Rabbi Hillel:

There will be no further Messiah for Israel, since they have already enjoyed him during the reign of Chizkiya.[[7]](#footnote-7)

What is the meaning of this opinion? Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher (1895–1983), author of *Torah Sheleima,* wrote an introduction to *Kol Ha-tor*, by Rav [Hillel Rivlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_Rivlin) of [Shklov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shklov), a student of the [Vilna Gaon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vilna_Gaon). In this book *Ha-tekufa Ha-gedola* (pp.130-140), he sums up ten explanations on the above opinion. Amongst others, he quotes Rashi and the Maharal who understand that Rabbi Hillel is suggesting that, in the future, God will redeem His people without using an emissary.

A similar opinion is mentioned in the *Haggada* of Pesach. Before the Exodus, God declares:

**I** will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and **I** will smite every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and upon all the gods of Egypt will **I** wreak judgments, **I am the Lord.[[8]](#footnote-8)**

The Haggada expounds this verse in the following way:

“I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night” — I and not an angel.

“And I will smite every firstborn in the land of Egypt” — I and not a seraph.

“And upon all the gods of Egypt will I wreak judgments” — I and not the emissary.

“I am the Lord” — I am He, and no other.

Some explain that this is the reason for the near omission of Moshe’s name from the *Haggada*.

Others, like Rav Meir ben Todros Ha-Levi (c. 1170–1244, also known as the Rama), believe that Rabbi Hillel is claiming that there will be no redemption in the future, and according to the Rambam’s definition would thus be considered a heretic!

Rav David ibn Zimra (Radbaz) agrees partially with the Rama that Rabbi Hillel is stating a heretical opinion. However, he argues that:

Surely Rabbi Hillel was a great man, and he erred in one of the fundamental principles of our religion when he said that Israel has no messiah…

But Rabbi Hillel is not regarded as a heretic, God forbid, on account of this error.

His reason is the following:

For if he were, how could they report traditions in his name? The reason is clear: since his heresy stems from thinking that the results of his speculation are true, he is regarded as if he had acted under duress, and so he is exempt.[[9]](#footnote-9)[[10]](#footnote-10)

Rav Yosef Albo (1380–1444) raises similar claims as the Radbaz does. Why is Rabbi Hillel mentioned in the Gemara if he is a heretic? This argument leads him to conclude that the belief in the *mashiach* is not a fundamental principle of Judaism as the Rambam claims; rather, it is one of many principles which exist within the Jewish tradition.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In Professor Avi Ravitzky’s book about the different religious responses to Zionism, he discusses the ideology of Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook and his followers, explaining that this ideology is fueled by messianic energy. However, he claims that this philosophy

is “messianism” without a Messiah, a redemptive process that takes place in the absence of a living human Redeemer. In these circles, as distinct from those of the present generation of the Lubavitcher Hasidim (see below), immediate religious expectation does not center on a personal messiah.[[12]](#footnote-12) Without abandoning traditional beliefs, attention is focused in a new way on the realm of collective history. One seeks the signs of Divine Providence amidst contemporary events in the life of the nation.

This stands in opposition to the view of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who is adamant in his belief that the *mashiach* is a person, a human emissary sent by God to redeem His people. He rejects Rabbi Hillel’s opinion, which he understands as arguing that the future redemption will be brought about by God directly. Quoting the Rambam in *Hilkhot Melakhim,* he argues:

The personal character of the messianic king is the focus of the messianic idea: the redemption will occur by the hands of a human being, an emissary of God, when He decides. Man, although he is mortal and his existence is temporary, is able to rise to the level of a Godly emissary.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rav Soloveitchik raises another question on the Rambam’s opinion regarding the belief in the coming of the *mashiach*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Gemara cites an argument whether or not the future redemption of the Jewish people is dependent on repentance.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Rambam rules in favor of Rabbi Eliezer, who holds that “Israel will be redeemed only through repentance.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

This rule, argues Rav Soloveitchik, threatens the belief in the coming of the *mashiach*:

But if one accepts Maimonides’ opinion and sides with Rabbi Eliezer who says that the coming of the Messiah is dependent upon repentance and that if it does not take place then there will be no redemption, how is it possible to declare, “I believe with complete faith in the advent of the Messiah and though he may tarry I will await his coming every day”; it is possible that he will tarry indefinitely if Israel does not repent; what sense is there in awaiting his coming daily?

Rav Soloveitchik offers a beautiful answer. He first quotes the next passage, in which the Rambam explains that:

The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of its exile and, immediately, it will be redeemed.

Accordingly, the real meaning in the belief in the coming of the *mashiach* is that we must believe that the Jewish people (*Knesset Israel*) will one day repent!

The Rav puts it this way:

It emerges from this that *faith in the coming of the Messiah is dependent upon our faith in Knesset Israel*. This implies that however far the Jewish people may go astray and become alienated from Judaism and fall prey to assimilation, in the end it will be restored. If we allow this faith to waver, then our entire belief in the coming of the Messiah is undermined!

1. Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambam, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Birat Migdal Oz, Aliyat Ha-teva* (6,7). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: 2004), pp. 139-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rambam, *Commentary to the Mishna*, Introduction to *Sanhedrin*, Chapter 10*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., end of list. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. BT *S*[*anhedrin* 98b](https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.98b?lang=he-en&utm_source=etzion.org.il&utm_medium=sefaria_linker). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Shemot* 12:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Radbaz, *Responsa* Vol. IV, no. 187 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This opinion is crucial for deciding the definition of a heretic nowadays. See Rav Yehuda Amital’s “How to Relate to One Who Has Lost His Faith,” available at: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/how-relate-one-who-has-lost-his-faith>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [*Sefer Ha-ikarim*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sefer_ha-Ikkarim) 1:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “*Al Ahavat Ha-Torah U-geulat Nefesh Ha-dor”* in *Be-sod Ha-yachad Ve-hayachid,* Pinchas Peli ed. (Jerusalem, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *On Repentance*, Pinchas Peli ed. (Orot Press), pp.132-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. BT *Sanhedrin* 97b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)