

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

The Messiah

If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone should say to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.

These are the words of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, from a volume called “Avot d'Rebbi Natan,” where the Rabbinic teachings from Pirkei Avot and the characters of the rabbis are expounded. The origin date is disputed but it could be as early as the 3rd century and as late as the 9th century CE.

Rabbi Yochanan lived through the destruction of the second temple, one of the darkest times in Jewish history, and emerged with a teaching that suggests that before we run towards easy solutions or others who will solve our problems for us, we should make sure that the first thing we do is plant seeds for our own future and tend to the needs of our world. He, like much rabbinic discourse, discourages us from running after the idea that someone or something could miraculously get us out of our messes.

In times of turmoil and uncertainty, we naturally find ourselves looking for quick fixes. On this Kol Nidre night, whether you're feeling worried about the Michigan senate race, the mainstreaming of antizionism and antisemitism, AI becoming sentient, environmental degradation, the wealth gap and political polarization, you might be praying for such an easy solution. But the Rabbis, and Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai in particular, lived through challenging times as well. Our sages witnessed the destruction of the second temple, the crusades in medieval Europe, the Spanish inquisition, the Shoah, the Farhud, they witnessed all of this, and they helped carry us and our precious Torah through these horrors. They didn't do this by stopping history, they did it by adapting while staying true to their roots throughout history. We are the beneficiaries of their courage and resilience.

Surprisingly, remarkably, the rabbis traversed all of this history while clinging to a pretty radical idea - that the Messiah had not yet come. There were times in history when Jews peeled off from the group, surely you all remember Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection were concurrent with the Temple's destruction and the Rabbis rebuilding. There was Shabbetai Tzvi, the 17th century Rabbi who convinced a not insignificant portion of the Jewish world to believe in him until (and even some after) he converted to Islam. There have been plenty of other Messianic figures, ranging from Shimon Bar Kochva in 132 CE who led to the events of Masada, to even in our own times the beloved Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shneerson who gave birth to the Chabad movement and did so much good that some of his followers even suggest he could be Moshiach.

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

But despite the popular support that these supposed messiahs received, rabbinic Judaism is, by and large, suspicious of messianism, quite hesitant to believe in a person who can bring Geulah, redemption. Our teffilot speak of God as Melech HaMlachim, the superior to any and all earthly kings. The Shema - a recitation of scripture that we are commanded to say multiple times a day, is a paradigm that communicates the singularity of God and God alone. There isn't a lot of room for stories about human redeemers. We have spent our millenia cultivating a direct relationship with Hakadosh baruch hu, meaning we are all responsible and accountable directly to the Holy Blessed One.

Lawrence Hoffman's rich commentary on our liturgy, "My People's Prayer Book," says of our central Jewish prayer, "The Amidah [by placing the prayer for the messiah only after the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the image of a redeemed world]] reminded Jews of just how much Judaism was not a messianic religion, for it relegated the messiah to a mere afterthought of redemption. Deliverance would occur, but only in God's good time and in ways that God alone could know." Not only do we have a 2000 year track record of rejectionism. The wisdom of time and experience has actually taught us to put real stock in the toil of the world. When you ask most Jews to speak about the afterlife, we will respond with some version of "well, Jews do believe in an afterlife but we don't spend much time focused on it, we care more about how we live, not what happens when we die."

We have witnessed the horrible things people are willing to do when they try to hasten the messiah, when they come to believe that a better world is possible. In 1994 Russian-Jewish born British philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote a "**Message to the 21st Century**" reflecting on the failures of civilization in the 20th century:

"If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems, that one can conceive an ideal society which men can reach if only they do what is necessary to attain it, then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise....

Messianism is an expression, even a desperate hope, that the world could be better. But the search for someone beyond ourselves to solve our problems for us displaces our responsibility for our own actions.

I believe in a better world, but I don't believe we get to that better world by escaping this one.

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

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The Crash(es)

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was a student of both Hillel and Shammai, who represented the two leading schools of thought -- instead of buying into one house, he built his own that incorporated torah and wisdom from this pair of rabbis that was renowned for their epic disagreements. Zakkai quite literally emerged from the ashes of the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE by faking his own death so that he could escape the besieged city to parlay with the enemy Roman army. When he made it before general Vespasian he bargained for “Yavne and its sages,” letting go of the Temple and taking instead a place to preserve and transform the intellectual inheritance of our people. He moved through a moment of destruction with profound clarity and resilience, faith, and creativity. And he created the Judaism we know today. A Judaism rooted in productive tensions and loving disagreements, a Judaism that could travel into exile in a way the Temple never could.

Rabbi Benay Lappe of Svara, a yeshiva based in Chicago, teaches “the crash talk” in every introductory Talmud course. In it she describes how the Rabbis survived the crash of the destruction of the second temple by creating what she calls “option 3 judaism”

She teaches: In the face of a “crash”—when a long-standing master narrative no longer resonates—there are three possible responses:

- 1) denial and retrenchment;
- 2) total abandonment; or
- 3) Option three: transformation via reinterpretation. Option three is where magic happens; it is, as Lappe suggests, the approach of Rabbi Yochanan and the sages of Yavna. Option 3 thinking sparked the revolution known as rabbinic Judaism, what we would simply call ‘Judaism’ today.

Lappe’s Torah is important. Svara’s tagline is “traditionally radical.” Radical is a polarizing buzzword that has come to signify the political or social belief that society requires fundamental, sweeping, or extreme changes to its core structure. But the etymology of radical is “getting at the root of something.” Roots by their nature keep us grounded and limit where we can go. Rooted ideas are ideas that can grow and flourish because they take into account history, story, family, tradition, and memory. Roots are the opposite of redlines, they are organic sources for inspiration from which good ideas grow. Roots are what nourish and sustain us.

Rabbi Lappe’s Torah has been knocking around in my head for the better part of a decade. When October 7th happened, I tried to find my way through this crash with the

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

inherited wisdom of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai, but I came to think that I'd downplayed my roots and overemphasized my agency. The crash wasn't starting now, it had started more than a century ago. My time-scale was totally off - the temple had been destroyed in 70CE and the rabbis took almost 200 years just to settle on the Mishnah and then another 300 for the Gemara. That is almost 500 years of transformation time. Look at our own century and you will see the Shoah, the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands, the founding of the State of Israel, the growth of the American Diaspora consonant with the population of the State of Israel. The losses we experienced in the 20th century AND the creative, ingenious, resilient responses to those losses are possibly as enormous and transformative as what the Rabbis went through, but **we are still in the relative infancy of the transformation that is taking place**. Frankly I am still trying to figure out what story we are writing together.

Shema Yisrael

Many of you have heard me speak at length about how I fell in love with being a Jew when living on a Jewish Farm in CT. Shout out to the organization that was part of it all, Adamah, where I'll be honored at this fall's annual summit. I loved the idea that I learned there at 21 years of age - that we had been schlepping around our Judaism in a suitcase for millenia and now it was time to unpack that suitcase and make a home for ourselves in America. I appreciate the dialogue that has happened with Israel since the 70s in the years after the 6 days war. Instead of the early Zionist rejection of the diaspora, *Shlilat haGalut*, the Israeli conscience vis-a-vis America has shifted to see us as part of a dispersion, not an impoverished Jewish existence but rather a different kind of Jewish existence. Perhaps another option 3?

As we try to sort out the story of where we are going as an American Jewry, there is a lot of talk about Israel. When I hear the anger and frustration, the fear and the heartbreak, I wonder sometimes whether we are talking about the real Israel or about something else -- our own fears and concerns about the survival of our people. The morality of our people. The future of our people.

Actual Israel and Israelis are in pitched battles over the future of their nation and their democracy - they have deep existential questions to answer about where they are going and who they are becoming, largely because they have been besieged on all sides for too long, and also because in that cauldron of pressure, a certain amount of Messianic thinking has taken root, spurred on by the remarkable opportunity to build a Jewish life in the land. For me, acknowledging the complexity of it all, I have come to a clear and simple moral conclusion for myself. For better and for worse, we are family. Many of us are literally family, and all of us are metaphorically family.

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

If there are among us American Jews who want to participate in praying and fighting for peace in the Middle East, and we want to do so in a way that won't threaten all the good that our Jewish forebearers built, I advise a pause similar to the one Ben Zakkai gave to the Messiah. If you are looking to make the world better through trying to fix Israeli politics, first check in with yourself: Is there a part of you that feels pressure to perform the right moral identity for others? Or do you have a story and set of experiences that inform your need to engage? If you find yourself genuinely concerned, there are so many Israelis who felt so deeply abandoned by the world, by the global left, and by the American Jewish left in the days, weeks, and now years since October 7th. Consider joining them in their option 3, wherein they hold the opinion that no-one is going anywhere and everyone's lives are sacred.

Here in America we will have to have good faith disagreement with each other and with our countrymen about what policies best support our American and our Jewish futures, but we should not submit to the pressure to uproot the place Israel and Israelis have in our hearts. As Amanda Ripley teaches in her book *high conflict*, when you are asking people to get out of conflict, you should never expect them to betray their core loyalties. If someone tells you you have to deny your roots in order to bring the better world, the messianic age - please remember what I'm telling you now... plant the sapling of your ancient and complicated inheritance anyway and make an appointment with myself or Rabbi Bergman to discuss watering tips for your new tree. It might struggle to grow, the available pots might not fit the roots, but believe me - if you nurture it, it will grow and bear fruit.

Constructing American Judaism

Back in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan, 31b* directly following our traditionally radical teaching about favoring our saplings over following a messiah, Rabbi Yochanan continues:

אם יאמרו לך הילדים נלך ונבנה בית המקדש אל תשמע להם ואם יאמרו לך הזקנים בוא ונסתור בית המקדש שמע להם. מפני שבנין ילדים סתירה וסתירת זקנים בנין.

If children tell you, "Come, let's build the Temple," do not listen to them. But if elders tell you, "Come, let's dismantle the Temple," listen to them. Why? Because what children build often leads to destruction, and what elders dismantle can be true rebuilding...

Rabbi Yochanan, the very sage who watched the Temple destroyed, preaches skepticism towards the youthful desire to build, and openness to elders who wish to dismantle. On its surface, we might jump to judge this teaching as ageist, but I want to sit with it for a moment. I think he is making an essential observation about institutions.

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

When children build, it is without the weight of the world on their backs. Children metaphorically are open and creative but also, unrooted. Building is easier for them because they are unfettered by the concerns of the past. We are encouraged to practice restraint and skepticism when it comes to their pursuits, because they are naturally unrestrained. Meanwhile, elders, who are inherently constrained, who have a hard time letting go of the way things have been, when they have a desire to dismantle, we trust that it can lead to something worth rebuilding. Let's take more time appreciating the restraint and the constraints of our elders and our institutions.

The dispute we are having across time and generations these days could be more productive and effective if we took R. Yochanan seriously. The generation that stands to inherit the future must take seriously the histories and legacies we stand upon, and the elders who have given so much to creating the world we inherit needn't be afraid to do a little deconstructing for the sake of rebuilding.

It is the job of adults to plant and nurture saplings, to help them to grow. If we don't like how our plants are growing, criticism alone won't change their direction. Instead we should turn reflective - what was in the potting soil I used? Did I water my sapling properly? Did I provide the sun and the light they needed to flourish?

In his "State of World Jewry" address at the 92nd street Y in March 2026, Bret Stephens suggested that we start prioritizing funding Jewish education over fighting anti-semitism. He was critiqued for this remark by his friend, ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt, the ultimate conclusion was that this isn't an either/or but rather a both/and problem. Yes we should be "both-anding" the Jewish future - but I want to reflect today, are we spending as much time, energy, and money on Jewish education as we are on fighting antisemitism? If we are worried about antisemitism and antizionism, are we growing our own Jewish knowledge? Are we nourishing our kids in their Jewish growth? Are we praying as much as we are screaming?

The more we insist on learning and living Torah, the more "One" we will become. The more clear we will be about what it means to each of us that we have always been Yisrael. The more we will know and understand our family in Israel.

Every shabbat I arrive here at Adat Shalom and I seriously feel that I'm stepping into Olam Haba. If there is any Messiah I believe in... it's the Rabbinic idea that Shabbat is supposed to be me'ain olam haba, a taste of the world to come. And I really do believe in what we are building here at Adat Shalom. The tefillah is ancient and transcendent, the Torah study is intellectually rigorous, the youth and family programming is educational, and the vibe is... great.

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

Tonight begins another shabbat, shabbat shabbaton, the shabbat of shabbats. Our deepest prayers will be said together in this very building. We will pray that our mistakes will be forgiven. We will pray that our intentions, the work of our hands, will come to meaningful fruition in the year ahead. We will pray for peace. We will pray for rain. We will pray for growth.

But six of the most important words we will say is the shema.

At the heart of our prayers is the recitation of a singular verse that contains multitudes. Judith Plaskow explains how "Monotheism is about the capacity to glimpse the One in and through the changing forms of the many, to see the whole in and through its infinite images. "Hear O Israel": despite the fractured, scattered, and conflicted nature of our experience, there is a unity that embraces and contains our diversity and that connects all things to each other.

We teach the shema to our children every bedtime. We are meant to speak it every morning, as we walk and as we raise a next generation. We speak it as the closing words of our loved ones' lives when they are on their deathbed. The Shema is a prayer that captures our core idea, that we are one without being the same.

The Shema comes from Devarim chapter 6. In the plain reading of the Torah, it comes as part of the instruction for what we are to do when we enter and possess the land that God has promised us. Given the Torah I have shared today, I want to express that the duty is incumbent upon us even and especially *outside* the land. On the simplest level, when we teach our children the six words of the Shema, they will never forget that we are and always have been Yisrael. We have to keep teaching the Shema and the Torah to our children because they are going to need it in every place and in every time that they dwell on this earth.

The anxieties we have about the Jewish future are real. We are still in the early stages of a seismic shift in who we are and who we are becoming. BUT, we are not the first Jewish generation to confront changing tides, and I know in my bones we won't be the last. Can we live a Judaism RIGHT NOW that our children and grandchildren will want to dwell in?

Take this final teaching as a comfort. In Devarim Rabbah 2:35 Jacob's 12 songs are gathered around his deathbed. Jacob tells them all of his anxieties about the uncertain Jewish future, surely they will seek out other Gods when he dies. Surely they will seek beyond the confines of the life he raised them with. Surely they will abandon what he tried so hard to teach.

Choosing the Mess Over the Messiah

But the sons respond to their father, Jacob, who you'll recall is also called Israel - Yisrael.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

Listen (dad) Hashem is our God and Hashem is one.

Stunned, comforted, and certain that he had just heard exactly what he needed to hear, Jacob whispered the very thing we whisper every time we say Shema ourselves. The very thing we will uniquely call out loud during the shema of this Yom Kippur

בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלִכּוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

Blessed is the name of God's glorious kingdom for ever and ever.

Tomorrow we will shout the words of shema as part of the closing chant that ends Yom Kippur. This shabbat of shabbats, this taste of the world to come, will hopefully be a shabbat in which we can feel less afraid and more loving to one another. In which we can feel that our particular experience of the world is seen and counted. In which we can believe not in a messianic time, but in our ability to traverse together the mess of our existence.

And by being one with the moment and one with each other, I truly believe we will be planting seeds that will grow into trees, and those trees will produce more seeds, that just may one day give root to a sapling that any of your children's children's children could be holding in their hand the day they hear the news that Moshiach has come.

Yisrael, if you are listening, Hashem is OUR GOD, Our God is ONE.¹

¹ Akiva Mattenson, "Thoughts and Prayers Podcast," Shalom Hartman Institute