

The messianic concept in modern Judaism

Koncepcja mesjanizmu we współczesnym judaizmie

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Abstract: The history of the Messiah in Judaism is a history of disappointed hopes. Again and again, there were salvation figures to whom this role was ascribed. But redemption from occupation and foreign rule, exile, oppression and persecution failed to materialize. Therefore, the expectation of the Messiah fell to the periphery of Jewish theology. This article examines in what ways the messianic concept plays a role in modern times and what it contributes to describing the relationship between God and humanity in Judaism. The author intends to show the development from the abandonment of a personal Messiah towards the affirmation of the prophets' hope for a universal messianic age in which the duty of all people to participate in the healing of the world becomes central. What becomes also clear is: The messiah idea cannot be a bridge between Christianity and Judaism.*

Keywords: Jewish Theology, Messiah, Messianism, Utopian Messianism, Restaurative Messianism, Pseudo-Messianic Movements, Chabad, Hasidism

Streszczenie: Historia mesjasza w judaizmie to historia zawiedzionych nadziei. Wielokrotnie przypisywano tę rolę różnym postaciom mającym nieść zbawienie, ale wybawienie z okupacji, zagranicznych rządów, wygnania, opresji i prześladowań nie nastąpiło. Dlatego też oczekiwanie na mesjasza straciło na znaczeniu w teologii żydowskiej. Niniejszy artykuł bada, jaką rolę koncepcja mesjanizmu odgrywa we współczesnym świecie i co sprzyja opisywaniu relacji pomiędzy Bogiem a ludzkością w judaizmie. W wyniku analiz

* The article is based on my contribution in Homolka/Hoppe/Krochmalnik 2022. Many thanks to Dr. Juni Hoppe for the assistance in preparing this article for print.

staje się jasne: idea mesjasza nie może być pomostem między chrześcijaństwem a judaizmem.

Słowa kluczowe: żydowska teologia, mesjasz, mesjanizm, utopijny mesjanizm, mesjanizm restauracyjny, pseudomesjanistyczne ruchy, Chabad, chasydyzm

“What is Jewish theology?” Louis Jacobs (1920-2006) reminds us of the task we face: “A Jewish theology to be relevant must grapple with the problems raised by modern thought but it cannot ignore the systematic presentations of the mediaeval giants. [...] The contemporary Jewish theologian must endeavor, however inadequately, to do for our age what the great mediaeval theologians sought to do for theirs. He must try to present a coherent picture of what Jews can believe without subterfuge and with intellectual honesty” (Jacobs 1973, 3-4). It is fascinating to trace the development of the Messiah concept in Judaism and to ask what the messianic notion contributes to describing the relationship between God and humanity from a Jewish perspective. With its 1988 statement *Emet Ve-Emunah* (Gordis 1988), Conservative Judaism offered a comprehensive description: “Since no one can say for certain what will happen in the Messianic era each of us is free to fashion personal speculation. Some of us accept these speculations are literally true, while others understand them as elaborate metaphors [...] For the world community we dream of an age when warfare will be abolished, when justice and compassion will be axioms of all, as it is said in Isaiah 11: «[...] the land shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.» For our people, we dream of the ingathering of all Jews to Zion where we can again be masters of our own destiny and express our distinctive genius in every area of our national life. We affirm Isaiah’s prophecy (2:3) that «[...] Torah shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem»” (Gordis 1988, 25).

Their attempt of how “Messiah” is to be understood discusses utopian ideals as well as the role of a messiah figure who delivers the world from evil. It responds to the notion that the destiny of Jews lies in statehood. But above all, the text emphasizes the imperative that the messianic age is brought about by personal actions. Through the doctrine of a Messianic figure, Judaism teaches us that every individual human being must live as if he or she, individually, has the responsibility to bring about the messianic age. Beyond that, we echo the words of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) based on the prophet Habakkuk (2:3) that though he may tarry, yet do we wait for him each day” (Gordis 1988, 27).

These statements delimit the horizon of meaning demonstrated by the application of the messianic concept today, but they also make clear the erosion

of this concept in Jewish theology. In 2012, Conservative Judaism presented a 935-page overview titled *The Observant Life – The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews* whose index did not even include the terms “Messiah,” “mashiach,” or “messianic age” (*The Observant Life* 2012).

This raises the question of what role the messianic concept really plays in contemporary Judaism: is it a central interpretive framework for Judaism with clear indications about God’s acts of redemption or is it a theological relic on the periphery that, with some consideration, can be explained from a Jewish perspective. This article traces the Messiah concept’s shift in significance over the last centuries in an endeavor to answer this question.

I. “Restorative” and “Utopian” Messianism

“I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah and though he may tarry, still I await him every day.” This is the twelfth principle of faith of Moses Maimonides which became part of morning services in the poetic form of *Yigdal*; to this day it is formulated as a creed in Orthodox prayer books at the end of the morning prayer (see Elbogen 1913, 88). In his compendium *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides does not refer to a utopian state of peace, love, and justice in the sense of Isaiah 2 and Micah 4, but rather to the restoration of the Kingdom of David: “In the future, the Messianic king will arise and renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty. [...] If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Mashiach” (Maimonides 1987, 11:1, 4). He continues: “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” (Maimonides 1987, 11:3).

What is at stake in Maimonides’s rational concept is the return of the Jews to their land of Israel and the reestablishment of a state under the rule of an ideal king. This person will be identified neither by working miracles nor by raising the dead, but rather by successfully establishing the state and restoring services in the Temple. Kenneth Seeskin also points to the fact that Maimonides does not place the perfection of humanity in any direct relationship to the expectation of a Messiah (Seeskin 2012, 33). Thus, for Maimonides, salvation has a political rather than an anthropological aim, and is oriented on the past.

In contrast, Schalom Ben-Chorin (1913-1999) points to the distinction Shemaryahu Talmon draws between “restorative” and “utopian” messianism (Ben-Chorin 1979, 280f). In restorative messianism, the notion of a golden age (in this case, the rule of David) is placed at the beginning of history, in what

can be called an “inverted eschatology.” Ben-Chorin also identifies this understanding in Maimonides as well as in a secular form in Zionism. He contrasts this restorative messianism with the utopian messianism of the prophets, a figure of hope (Ben-Chorin 1979, 287).

Restorative and utopian factors are not limited to biblical messianism. Both also influenced the Talmud and Kabbalistic mysticism. In the Talmud, however, the rabbis formulated the possibility for collective participation: Israel could actively co-determine the beginning of the messianic age. The Messiah would come if all of Israel observed Shabbat twice or even once, or if it were to collectively profane it (*Shabbat* 118b 2022; *Shemot Rabbah* 25, 12 2022; *Sanhedrin* 98a 2022). Thus, the rabbinical literature shifted away from the reestablishment of an ideal kingdom as the central idea, and the notion of redemption took center stage. However, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) described its impact for Judaism as such: “Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance” (Scholem 1971, 1). Redemption takes place in this world as Israel’s liberation from suffering and in a universal extension as the rule of peace, salvation, and renewal throughout the world.

2. Messianic Euphoria and Pseudo-Messianic Movements

The messianic concept increased its influence in the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah (Sherwin 2009, 150-154; see: Davidowicz 2011, 1). In the mid-seventeenth century, it seemed possible to answer not only the question of when but also in what form the Messiah would come. The emergence of this messianic movement was shaped by the annihilation of entire communities, an apocalyptic experience: the death of tens of thousands of Jews in the uprisings led by the Cossack leader Khmelnytsky (1648/1649), the after-effects of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497), the economic demise of Jewish communities in Eastern and Western Europe, the loss of significance of the autonomy of Jewish communities and with it the Council of the Four Lands (Va’ad Arba’ Aratzot, 1764 in Poland). All of this shook the foundations of Jewish life¹ and was interpreted by many as the supposed “birth

¹ This was certainly not a genuinely Jewish phenomena because, in addition to the political and religious unrest in the wake of the Thirty Years War and the Inquisition, there were severe natural disasters that made Central European Christian populations equally receptive to new millenarian movements such as the Quakers, Mennonites, and Anabaptists (see: Rapoport-Albert 2011, 76).

pangs of the Messiah.” This interpretation gave rise to the success of one young mystic: Sabbatai Zvi (1626-1676), who popularized the Kabbalah² beyond an exclusive circle of scholars. The first step toward his later success was a voyage to the Holy Land where he met Nathan of Gaza, his prophet, who basically discovered and accompanied him, taking Elijah as a model. While Sabbatai Zvi was primarily focused on his own redemption and that of his God, his prophet formulated the theoretical foundations for the person of the Messiah. According to Yehuda Liebes, Sabbatianism was not primarily focused on the redemption of the people, but rather on the redemption of the religion (Liebes 1993, 106).

“In his eyes [Sabbatai Zvi], the people and the religion are nothing but a means for the worship of «the true God» and, if this «God» essence is not precisely known, then God is not true, religion is an empty shell and new frameworks must be sought” (Liebes 1993, 100). The deliberate waiving of commandments and prohibitions as a conscious antagonism to Jewish doctrine, was a pattern that was already associated with the coming of the Messiah in the Middle Ages, and of central importance to the followers of Sabbatai Zvi (see: Maciejko 2011, 32f). The beginnings of redemption were supposed to be manifested by the present world coming to a catastrophic end through terror and destruction, with persecution and suffering as the harbingers of revolution. The preceding chaos is a fundamental element of the dialectic of messianic utopias, and so redemption is only possible by erasing the old world (Werblowsky 1992, 39). Nevertheless, the Sabbatians saw themselves as Jews trying to renew Judaism from within. Many followers of Sabbatai Zvi sold their belongings and gave up their existence in exile for a better life in Eretz Yisrael. Sabbatai Zvi’s 1666 conversion to Islam led to the demise of Sabbatianism, though its influence persisted for another 150 years, in the crypto-Jewish community of the Dönme in Thessaloniki, for example (Levine 2003, 111 *passim*). While Sabbatai Zvi himself explained his conversion as the will of his god, Nathan of Gaza defended his apostasy as a necessary step toward liberating divine sparks from the world of evil for *tikkun olam* – the healing of the world. At this point, the movement’s relationship to Kabbalah is clearest. Sabbatai Zvi’s failure paved the way for a series of other figures such as Baruchio Russo in Thessaloniki (1676-1720) who revealed themselves as the new Messiah or were spoken of as such. The concept of a Messiah figure had gained

² The Kabbalah is a mystical tradition of Judaism that was handed down orally. It seeks fulfillment in a direct experience of God in timelessness, “outside of space and time.” A detailed discussion can be found in Grözinger (2005), see also: Werblowsky (2013, 120). The expectation of the Messiah is not inherent in these texts. Rather, messianic hope arises from the teaching of *tikkun olam* – the redemption of creation from chaos, initiated by the messianic age.

popularity, and its pretenders saw themselves as the heirs of Sabbatai Zvi,³ as was the case with Jakob Josef Frank (born Jankiew Lejbowicz, 1726-1791).⁴ On a sales tour through Poland and Podolia, he decided to lead the Sabbatian movement and declared himself the Messiah in order to reunite its scattered groups (Lenowitz 1998, 171).⁵ He converted to Catholicism in Lviv in 1759. Disputes with the Catholic bishop and local rabbis in Kamianets-Podilskyi in 1757 and in Lvov in 1795 led to a polarization of the Jewish community. The formally Catholic Frankists based their teachings on the idea that breaking laws would hasten the arrival of the Messiah. In 1787, Frank settled with a large retinue in the Isenburg Castle in Offenbach. Large groups of his followers lived in Prague, Brno, and Poland. After Frank's death, his daughter Eva (1754-1817) led the sect, which eventually dissolved into the rest of society.

Gershom Scholem (Liebes 1993, 93) brought pseudo-messianic movements back into our consciousness (Neusner 1967, 13-48: 14). In the twentieth century in particular, the phenomenon of Sabbatianism was pursued with new fascination, closely associated with a special interest in Jewish mysticism. In 1967, Jacob Neusner wrote: "Shabbatai Zvi was not merely «the Messiah,» but rather played a central role in the metaphysical drama created by tensions within the Godhead itself." Yehuda Liebes emphasizes the approach of Zionist historians such as Joseph Klausner, Aaron Zeev Aescoly, and Abba Hillel Silver, who see in pseudo-messianism the desire for direct political redemption and claim it as a forerunner of their own movement. Liebes contrasted this political appropriation of Sabbatianism with his idea of revolt against traditional religion in the form of spiritual renewal.⁶

R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (1924-2015) points out that there is no necessary connection between catastrophic events in Jewish history and the emergence of (pseudo-)messianic movements. Not all severe shocks to Jewish life in exile incited messianic expectations. According to Werblowsky, the same goes for the idea of the Messiah, which is "undoubtedly a prerequisite, but no sufficient reason" for the emergence of messianic movements (Werblowsky 1992, 119). While there may not be a causal link between them, the failure of euphoric pseudo-Messiahs definitely had implications for the concept of messianism. The hope for redemption through a Messiah from the house of David who

³ For a detailed discussion, see: Harris Lenowitz (1998, 168f).

⁴ Interest in Jakob Frank and Frankism grew in recent years, leading to the publication of more precise studies, the most important of which include: Ascarelli/Davidowicz (2011); Maciejko (2011).

⁵ He saw himself not as the reincarnation as Sabbatai Zvi, but rather as the Messiah sent to earth. See also: Maciejko (2011, 30).

⁶ "This was the aim of Sabbatianism – the redemption and renewal of religion, of faith, and of the true God. In the eyes of Sabbateans, exile is the exile of religion, and its place of exile is the fossilized tradition, which has long since forgotten its roots and aims" (Liebes 1993, 93, 106).

would gather the exiled in the Land of Israel got into a fundamental crisis following the experiences of Sabbatianism and Frankism. Hasidism, with its joyful worldly orientation was possibly an answer to this disappointment.

3. The Concept of the Messiah in Hasidism

Johan Maier describes the mood in the large, religiously underserved communities of Podolia and Galicia beginning in 1740/1750 as follows: “The rather formalistic rabbinical establishment was not able to live up to the expectations of a tendency toward piety that was still emotionally determined to a large extent by the Sabbatian movement” (Maier 2001, 92). Hasidism began as a reform movement and a reaction to the disastrous events of the Sabbatean and Frankish movements (Dinur 1991, 86-172) and developed into one of the central currents of Eastern European Jewish religiosity in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Hasidic communities bitterly opposed the Jewish Enlightenment and were in turn opposed by its adherents, but above all by proponents of classical rabbinical doctrine as well, and later also by socialists and Zionists. The weakening of the messianic idea can be clearly observed in Hasidic tales of bringing about messianic time and about the task of the individual – in the form of a rebbe or tsaddik – on the path toward it. “An unbeliever once expounded to the rabbi of Berditchev that even the great old masters had erred gravely, that Rabbi Akiba, for instance, had identified Bar Kokhba, the rebel, for the Messiah and honored him accordingly. The rabbi of Berditchev replied: «There was an emperor whose only son fell ill. One physician advised them to spread an acrid salve on a piece of linen and wrap it around the bare body of the patient. Another contradicted him, saying that the boy was too weak to bear the great pain the salve would cause him. A third prescribed a sleeping potion, but the fourth feared it might prove injurious to the patient’s heart. Then the fifth suggested that they give the prince a spoonful whenever he woke up and was in pain. And so it was done. When God saw that the soul of Israel had sickened, he wrapped it in the acrid linen of the Exile, and that the soul might bear it, he swathed it in numbing sleep. But lest this destroy it, he wakes it from time to time with the hope in a false Messiah, and then lulls it to rest again until the night is past and the true Messiah appears. And for the sake of this, even the eyes of sages are sometimes blinded»” (Buber 1991, 231).

A multitude of narratives of miracles and cosmic restoration can be found within their hagiographic system Lenowitz (1998, 199). However, the connection between historical events and the appearance of the Messiah, previously emphasized in apocalyptic visions, loses significance.

Baal Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, around 1700-1760) wrote to his brother-in-law in 1750 about his journey to heaven, saying that he received his directives from the Messiah himself, who gave him five conditions for his coming: “I asked the Mashiah: «When will the Master come?» and he answered: «By this you shall know: In the time when your teaching will become public and revealed in the world, and your wellsprings will burst forth to the farthest extremes, that which I have taught you and you have comprehended, and they also shall be able to perform unifications and elevations as you, and then all of the kelipot [forces of evil] will cease to exist, and there shall be a time of good will and salvation»”.⁷

The primary aim in Hasidism was individual salvation, while national and universal aspects were marginalized (Ravitzky 1996, 193). Redemption came to the fore as a process of individual purification. The individualization of the messianic idea, which separated the task of salvation from the figure of the Messiah, became the core of Hasidic doctrine. “A devout rabbi was interrupted during his study of the sacred books when an excited student stormed into the room and shouted, «Master, the Messiah has come!» The rabbi rose and looked out the window. After a while he muttered, «Nothing has changed,» and returned to his studies” (Hahn 1999, 142).

In Hasidism, which represents a late stage in Jewish mysticism, it is interesting to see how notions of Kabbalah are transformed. The key word of the Lurian Kabbalah, “*tikkun*,” takes on a special meaning here: the “restitution or reintegration of all beings to their original state as it was conceived in the divine plan of creation.” Robert N. Levine comments: “*Tikkun* was born in the heart, soul and yearning of the individual, not necessarily the Messiah. [...] Hasidism brought kabbalah back to its roots: individual responsibility for *tikkun*, which will lead to the redemption of the many, after which the Messiah shall arrive” (Levine 2003, 130, 133). Redemption was to be found at the end of this process. Thus, messianic impetus was diffused in the doctrine of *tikkun* (Scholem 1991).

The importance of the messianic element for Hasidism is contentious among researchers. While Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Gershom Scholem understood Hasidism as a reaction to Sabbatianism and messianism, Benzion Dinur and Isaiah Tishby viewed messianism as an important element of its success and vitality (Dan 2002, 1149). The idea of a personal Messiah continued and found new resonance. An example of this is Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), who was already an exception in his day because he was

⁷ Quoted in: “The Chamber of Mashiah” in *The teachings of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, tr. Eliezer Shore. chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380401/jewish/The-Chamber-of-Mashiah.htm. See also Simon Dubnow (1991, 37).

more active within the framework of Kabbalistic moral literature than in the classical teachings of Hasidism (Green 1992a, 390f).

He saw himself as a *tzadik* and redeemer who was obligated to offer his followers help with *tikkun olam*, with the restoration of the cosmos, and their individual souls (Green 1992b, 182-220). By emphasizing sin and the necessity of repentance, Nachman of Breslov created an additional variant of active messianism that found its way into the religious practices of the Breslov Hasidim. He felt he had a higher calling, as was demonstrated by his messianic self-confidence when he proclaimed himself to be the *Tzadik Ha-Dor* in 1806, who was supposed to be the forerunner of the Messiah ben David. In this capacity, he urged the ritual of penance (*Tikkun HaKlali*), midnight prayer (*Tikkun Chatzot*), and fasting (Liebes 1993, 115).⁸ This earned him not only the ridicule of the *Mitnagdim* (Hebrew for “opponent,” characterized by an anti-Hasidic attitude found in the milieu of the Lithuanian Talmud academies), but also their increased distrust, so that many writings were shared only among the closest confidants (see: Green 1992b, 207).

The traditional elites, fearing for their influence, waged a bitter struggle against the Hasidim, whose teachings they viewed as a continuation of Sabbatian heresy. Aware of Hasidism’s revolutionary potential, they recognized its danger for their position within traditional communities as well as for their power to define religious questions. Hasidism was not primarily about keeping the mitzvot, about scholarship, or about ritual, the areas of traditional religiosity. Its focus instead was on direct religious existential experiences, the effect of human activity on the higher spheres, ecstatic prayer, and a turning away from ritualism (Silberstein 1987, 402-432).

The strength of Hasidism’s hope for the Messiah is demonstrated today by the efforts of the Lubavitch Hasidim for recognition of their deceased spiritual leader Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) as a personified Messiah. He received harsh criticism from Zionist rabbis for his appeal to the diaspora to “create a Land of Israel here” (Ravitzky 1996, 185). The consolidation of Zionism initially brought an emphasis on spiritual values. Efforts to establish a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael were viewed critically by members of Hasidic movements, since the traditional view “requires the Jewish people to practice complete historical and political passivity until divine salvation occurs” (Ravitzky 1996, 194). However, they are not closed to the possibility of settling in Eretz Yisrael (Ravitzky 1996, 184f). Less a particular characteristic than a shift in emphasis can also be observed in Chabad Lubavitch’s⁹ urgent mes-

⁸ “R. Nakhman of Bratslav [...] is a messianic figure par excellence and his personality is indeed the main content of its ideology,” (Green 1992a, 417).

⁹ Acronym for the Kabbalistic concepts *Chochma* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding), and *Da’at* (knowledge); a self-designation by Hasidic groups.

sianic activity since the middle of the last century, a classic example of disaster messianism (Ravitzky 1996)¹⁰. “Be ready for redemption soon, shortly in our day!” (Ravitzky 1996, 195). Under the leadership of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, this expectation reached its climax and gave way to the certainty that it was up to every Jew to act in such a way that redemption could occur immediately, basically today (Ravitzky 1996, 196).

Against the view that the Messiah will need several attempts to redeem the world, as the Lubavitch Hasidim openly advocate, David Berger has argued that a person can also be identified as a Messiah though he died in an unredeemed world. After his death and burial, his return is awaited (Berger 2001, 103).

4. The Universalization of the Messiah Concept after the Emancipation

The French Revolution shook European society to the depths of its existence. New philosophical and scientific approaches fundamentally called the old system into question. This affected Christianity as well as Judaism (Breuer 2004, 206). Influenced by the connection between Protestant theology, the Enlightenment, and the writings of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), a process of rethinking took place that also called into question the system of traditional Talmudic learning and non-academic training for the rabbinate. In particular supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah), the Maskilim, endeavored to redefine it in a contemporary way in connection with the pursuit of social recognition. By interpreting Judaism as a religion, the writer, translator and bookseller Saul Ascher (1767-1822) ultimately tried to open up new opportunities for its members as a minority within the majority society, but at the same time to reconnect all Jews to their community. Napoleon used the Sanhedrin, which was convened in Paris in 1806, to demand the loyalty of the Jews as French citizens. But sharing and participating in the nation-state cannot be reconciled with the longing for to rebuild Jerusalem, re-establish the rule of the house of David, and gather the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael – notions that are connected with the arrival of the Messiah in the traditional Amidah prayer. Israel Jacobson (1768-1828), who was president of the Consistory of the Israelites in

¹⁰ During the time of the most charismatic Lubavitch Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, devastating pogroms, revolutions, and the outbreak of the Second World War occurred. The people were also under the impression that they lived amidst drastically and rapidly changing social conditions, which brought with them an increased awareness of crisis. In addition, interest in Jewish history grew, especially in Eastern Europe, and as a result narratives of violence such as the Khmelnitsky pogroms were presented comprehensively for the first time.

the Napoleonic model state of Westphalia, tried “to separate the kernel from the husk [...] and to modify essential institutions and customs as soon as refined reason presents them as useless or harmful” (quoted in: Bomhoff 2010, 33).

Jacobson was not alone in this concern. Saul Ascher was the first to use the term “Orthodox Jew” to describe someone who “opposes any change or reform of traditional halachic Judaism” (Schulte 2002, 188). This caused religion to ossify and required a reform of Judaism. In his 1792 work *Leviathan oder über Religion in Rücksicht des Judentums* (“Leviathan or On Religion in Respect of Judaism”), Ascher questioned Jewish ritual law and for example declared the food-related rules as obsolete. On the other hand, he retained the idea of the Messiah as a central concept in his 14 principles of faith: “We hope for redemption through His Messiah in this life or in our grave with those whom he will respect as worthy in the resurrection” (Ascher 2010, 179). The mathematician, philosopher and educator Lazarus Bendavid (1762-1836) declared to the contrary “that the expectation of a Messiah does not constitute an essential article of faith for the Jews. Nobody is upset [...] when the Jew finds his Messiah in the fact that good princes have placed him on an equal footing with their other citizens and granted him the hope that by fulfilling all civic duties, he will also acquire all civil rights” (Bendavid 1823, 224f).

The equality of Jews in European nation-states made the question of the Messiah and messianism problematic. The silk manufacturer David Friedländer (1750-1834) took the first radical step. “He saw the need to strip the liturgy of all elements that marked the Jews as foreign [...] Besides, the modern Jew could not seriously pray for his return to Jerusalem, for the rebuilding of the old Temple, and its sacrificial service” (Meyer 2000, 77; Reif 1993, 280).

David Friedländer was not alone in his call for change. The New Israelite Temple Association was founded in 1817 under the leadership of preacher and educator Eduard Kley (1789-1867). The Hamburg Temple’s prayer book follows the Sephardic rite and was the first comprehensive reform liturgy. It is characterized by the deletion or universalization of messianic passages: in the second Benediction of the Shema, “And lead us in dignity to our holy land” becomes “Bring us your blessings in all parts of the earth” (Herrmann 2005, 72).

Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) noted in an essay about the Hamburg Temple dispute of 1819: “Now, however, in no way has a radical change been made in the prayer book of the Temple, at most its content is expressed here and there in slightly different nuances; even the points highlighted in the damning «Announcement,» the redemption, the arrival of the Messiah, and the resurrection – which, incidentally, are nowhere described as an essential part of the prayer – remain completely unchanged in most places, and only slightly modified in others” (Geiger 1885, 127).

In the Berlin reform community, too, the liturgy was initially changed only carefully (Geiger 1885, 113-196; Petuchowski 1968, 45). “The word *redeemer*, referring to the Messiah, has been rendered with the more impersonal «redemption»” (Meyer 2000, 84).

With legal equality, the hope of a personal Messiah and the restoration of Israel became obsolete. Geiger’s attitude toward a return is clear: “The restoration of the old conditions – that was a wistful expectation for the future, but it is no longer. We do not demand a return to Palestine, we do not want to constitute a particular nationality, we do not want to create our own state; instead, we recognize our great homeland in all regions of the world, love our given fatherland with all of our souls, while looking trustingly towards the great promise that the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God [...]” (Geiger 1868, 17).

From the 1840s onwards, the idea of the Messiah experienced a general depersonalization. The individual gained in importance, and the subjectification of the messianic task was firmly anchored in Jewish theology. The Messiah became the idea of messianism, a messianic time, which emphasizes Judaism’s orientation toward the future, and which absolves Judaism’s mission of its historicity.

These debates are also reflected in the prayer books of the time. Jakob J. Petuchowski (1925-1991) has traced how in the Amidah, the traditional prayer formula in the 10th blessing, “and bring us together from the four corners of the earth into our land,” was modified to weaken the expression of hope for returning to the land of the fathers; in *Die Deutsche Synagoge* of 1817, for example, “into our land” was abstracted to “to eternal happiness” (Petuchowski 1968, 216ff).

As a rabbi in Dessau, Samuel Hirsch (1815-1889) questioned the traditional image of the Messiah in his sermons: “If everything is full of knowledge of God, what can He still achieve? [...] Yes, there is only one thing left for us to do, to research what the personal Messiah is to us” (Hirsch 1843, 97). Hirsch emigrated to the USA in 1866 and became a central proponent of Classical Reform in Philadelphia.

Abraham Geiger emphasized universalism as the core of the messianic message, not the nationalism that had been evoked over the centuries (Biale 1992, 523). However, he claimed that the phase of nationalism was essential for development, thus Christianity only propagates a misunderstanding of universalism. In the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, an aspect of progressive processuality increasingly came to the fore; the belief in a new age became decisive for an entire era: “The miracle will be that the ecstasy will last, the peace will be eternal. It is precisely this attitude that touches the most sublime depths of human suffering. Our pain lies not in the fact that we cannot attain purity, as Christianity would have it – no, it is that we are unable to make it last, that is

the great and only and truly abysmal tragedy. To solve it is Judaism's hope in the Messiah" (Bergel-Gronemann 1921-1922, 271).

This marked a further step toward a universalization of the messianic idea. The mystical elements gave way to the general utopia of messianic time. It was the mission of the Jewish people to attain it for the benefit all humanity. The sovereignty of the Jewish people invoked by Maimonides as a precondition was replaced by the acquisition of civil rights in the countries of the now positively interpreted diaspora.

Milestones in the theological foundation of the reform movement were several rabbinical conferences since the 1840s. The Philadelphia and Pittsburgh rabbinical conferences of 1869 and 1885 in particular set new standards for a timely Judaism. Their initiators declared: "We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men." As an enlightened prayer community, they saw no need to return to the land of their fathers, rebuild the temple, and re-establish temple service among Aaron's descendants (see: *Declaration of Principles* 2022).

5. Return from Exile and Gathering in the Land of Israel

The issue of the Messiah, as it arose between the poles between oppression and hope, was of course not only a question for renewal movements, but also for traditional rabbinical Judaism. As Rabbi Tuvja HaCohen (1652-1729) deemed it: "It is fitting for every member of the Mosaic faith [...] to believe in the coming of the Messiah, because the Torah commands one to believe in the words of the Prophet [...] and the Prophets prophesied the coming of the Messiah" (quoted in: Grözinger 2005, 278). But rabbinic thought also couldn't avoid the influences of Kabbalistic thought. The Prague Talmudist Judah Löw (1512/1525-1609) spoke of the Messiah as a supernatural being (Grözinger 2005, 278). Messianic concepts always emphasized restorative elements such as intensified efforts to settle in the land of Israel and permanent Jewish presence there.

With legal emancipation, the entry of Jews into the bourgeoisie, and the Jewish reform movement in the wake of the Jewish Enlightenment, traditional Judaism in Central Europe was faced with a multitude of challenges at the beginning of the 19th century. Social participation in the diaspora had to be reconciled with the idea that the Messiah would restore the kingdom of David. On the basis of Talmud and midrash, messianic time was understood as an event that would befall humans and that would come about in a miracu-

lous manner like the Exodus from Egypt (Morgenstern 1992, 434). Nevertheless, there were repeated efforts to settle in the land that represented a concrete hope for the coming of the Messiah. The first organized Hasidic immigration took place in 1764 and was led by students of Baal Shem Tov. They settled in Tiberias, Safed, Hebron, and Jerusalem, establishing the tradition of the four holy cities of Judaism. The strengthening of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael, was also among the messianic activities of the disciples of the Vilna Gaon (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, 1720-1797) known as the Peruschim, who founded a congregation in Jerusalem in 1808 (Morgenstern 1992, 434); more immigrants followed in 1840 when the arrival of the Messiah was expected in the Jewish year 5600. Targeted settlement by Eastern European Jews with the financial support of the Jewish philanthropist and entrepreneur Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885) fulfilled not only the obligation to give tzedakah, but also to strengthen the Jewish presence in Eretz Yisrael (cf. *Die Lehren des Judentums nach den Quellen* 1999, 1).

While settlement in the land of the fathers was a marginal phenomenon for centuries, in the course of the development of modern nation states and under social pressure to assimilate, small proto-Zionist groups began to see a solution to the problems of diaspora in the return to Eretz Yisrael. The writings of Moses Hess (1812-1875) illustrate how the hope of establishing Jewish sovereignty in a separate state was closely linked to religious, messianic hopes: “Every Jew has within him the potentiality of a Messiah [...]” (Hess 1918, 45). For Hess, the scriptures do not attribute immortality to the Jewish people because the Jewish nation still existed at the time they were written. But precisely this immortality is closely linked to the belief in a national-humanitarian Messiah. In the second letter in his book *Rome and Jerusalem*, Hess emphasizes that Judaism is “an active life factor, which has coalesced with the national consciousness into one organic whole” (Hess 1918, 49).

The proto-Zionists were criticized by both orthodoxy and reformers. While the reformers intended to transform the messianic idea into a progressive one that opened people’s intellectual and moral perspectives as an aspect of active participation in redemption, the Zionists were initially only concerned with political emancipation. Representatives of Reform Judaism saw the establishment of a Jewish state as incompatible with their universalist idea of messianism; Orthodoxy, for its part, saw the goal of founding a nation state as a “heretical betrayal of the messianic faith” (Werblowsky 2013, 124). Shortly after the consolidation of the Zionist movement (1897), however, some Jewish-Orthodox representatives became vocal, propagating the importance of the repopulation of the Land of Israel as a way to bring about the messianic era. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the British Mandate in what was then Palestine, advocated the argument

that the settlement was preparation for God's intervention and justified Jewish Orthodox activities that fed into the general Zionist movement (Werblowsky 2013, 125).¹¹ According to Kook, God even uses worldly forces of evil to create a material basis for spiritual redemption, comparing this process to the pressing of wine (see: Abraham Isaac Ha-Cohen Kook 1941, 140f).

6. The Idea of the Messiah in German Rationalism

"Above all, let us just not lose our messianic optimism. Then the evil spirits will disappear again, the creative cultural power of our young religion will certainly come down to general knowledge and recognition – as progress towards the good." In a first step, Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) explains that Jewish messianism lacks the idea of the eschatological.¹² "Messianism will only be fully understood when every undertone of the hereafter is stripped from the concept of the messianic future" (Cohen 1914a, 125). He writes that history is constant progress toward the reconciliation of people before the one and only God. Through reconciliation, the contradictions of the past and the present can be overcome, and redemption accomplished. "The dignity of man is not grounded merely in the individual man but in the idea of humanity" (Cohen 1991, 48). This distinguishes the Jews from all other religions that see their golden age in the past. The eschatological belief of Christianity is thus a declining trend in contrast to messianism (see Trepp 1994, 337f). It is incumbent on the Jews, in their historical function as servants of God and outsiders, to awaken compassion and love of humanity through their suffering and thus to turn all human beings into fellow human beings (Trepp 1994, 238). "Here the idea of humanity, which within prophetism represents the Messiah, is sharply and clearly separated from the notion of an individual person, be it a historical person or just a figure of faith" (Cohen 1914b, 12). The individual attains eternal life because their soul is preserved in collective memory. With the knowledge that, because they are chosen by God, the people do not die, according to Hermann Cohen, each individual and thus the entire community achieves eternal life. Christianity and Judaism are dependent on each other in their historical mission.

¹¹ Rabbi Kook is considered one of the spiritual fathers of the Gush Emunim movement, which propagated the settlement of the biblical Eretz Yisrael as a prerequisite for the arrival of the Messiah.

¹² Cohen developed his theological ideas in contrast to Kant on the one hand and in response to Heinrich von Treitschke after his "return" to Judaism on the other. This led him to believe that German nationalism and Jewish messianism shared a single purpose, making a Jewish nation-state superfluous, since the future of the Jews lies in Germany (Biale 1992, 525).

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) in turn interprets Jewish messianism in his *Star of Redemption* on the basis of the revelation at Sinai and Israel's covenant with God, which allowed the Jews to know the truth (Dubbels 2011, 3). His concept of redemption and the messianism along with it is shaped by the conflict between political finiteness and the conception of a metahistorical Judaism.¹³ The attempt to bring about salvation, as Zionism tries to do, poses an existential threat to Judaism because it has only proven its true strength in *galut* [exile], where it found the opportunity for renewal that would be taken from it were it to consolidate in a new center (Trepp 1994, 244). The way to redemption leads through love and in this way to the unification of humanity. Judaism, which has already reached its goal, has left religious conflict behind it and overcome the state, making it an example to nations (Rosenzweig 2005, 351). The liturgy as a medium of self-assurance for the Jews is of particular importance for preservation in their stateless existence. Through the liturgy they become conscious of their eternity again and again in the cycle of the year (Rosenzweig 2005, 352).¹⁴ Martin Buber also sees messianism less as an apocalyptic event.¹⁵ Significant elements of his notion are based on the theological foundations of Hasidism, in the "doctrine of a community that is directly connected to god and therefore world-facing" (Schwarzenau 1997, 16). However, he supplements this approach with restorative elements that he considers central. He regards the idea of a Jewish state as an important part of redemption because "the community of volunteers" in Palestine should be "an example and prototype for the whole world" (Dubbels 2011, 384). For Buber, redemption is by no means the end of history. Rather, it is part of a constant process that each individual contributes to in this life (Biale 1992, 526). He viewed the high level of Jewish participation in the socialist movement and the enthusiasm for Zionism as evidence that messianism is a strong element in Judaism. What both movements had in common was the fact that humans became actors who could bring about the task of the Messiah – change – themselves.¹⁶

The public nature of redemption, which Gershom Scholem (1971, 1-36) emphasizes for Jewish messianism, is entirely in the tradition of German-Jewish thought (Buber, Rosenzweig, Cohen). Like his contemporaries, he

¹³ "From the fiery heart of the Star there shoot out the rays. They seek their way through the long night of the times. It must be an eternal way, not a temporal one, even if it leads equally through time" (Rosenzweig 2005, 357).

¹⁴ Also in play here is his supposition that the individual generations may have worked independently toward redemption, but they are nevertheless connected to one another through collective memory.

¹⁵ This is a legitimate aspect for Buber, however, one which had already been neutralized with Hasidism's return to Judaism. (Biale 1992, 540).

¹⁶ Various Israeli historians have engaged with this problem, for example: Abba Hillel Silver (1927); Joseph Klausner (1956); Aaron Zeev Aescoly (1956).

also believed in the processual nature of Jewish redemption, which is rejected in Christianity, where redemption with commitment to Jesus is an event that takes place in the spiritual realm (Scholem 1971, 1). In his research on Sabbatianism and Hasidism, Scholem tries to rehabilitate apocalypticism for Judaism. His views have their roots thoroughly in Jewish thought. Historical changes are catalyzed by revolutionary outbursts that arise from these apocalyptic myths (Biale 1992, 527). The “destructive element” forced the Jewish tradition to be constantly revised (Dubbels 2011, 405), causing messianism to gain its importance. “The magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds to the endless powerlessness in Jewish history during all the centuries of exile, during which it was unprepared to come forward onto the plane of world history.” It is a “a life lived in deferment” that the Jews lead in exile, “in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished” (Scholem 1971, 35). With the reform and secularization of the law, Judaism was deprived of a fertile medium for this development (Biale 1992, 536). Because messianism had become so weak, it was logically replaced by Zionism.

Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873-1956) describes the concept of the Messiah and the meaning of exile in the Jewish religion quite differently: “It is nothing short of expectation; the word hope would be too weak an expression for it; for this expectation in Judaism is not a mere desire or an opinion, but it is a conviction, the faith of him who believes in his deed and in his path, for which he has been appointed by God. To be sent by God and to expect God, such is Jewish piety. The tension between these two and the unity which they constitute, that is the future as it is experienced in Judaism, the *Messianic element* which is its own special peculiarity” (Baeck 1936, 233).

In Baeck’s opinion, the task is placed on the human being, he is called to it, “and yet it is denied to him [...] the great thing, the task which *God* sets him, reaches beyond his earthly existence.” (Baeck 1936, 233). He is granted a glimpse of the “promised land,” but he has to live his life on earth. It is his service to humanity that lasts longer than the life of the individual. The mission and promise would be passed on from generation to generation. But it is the individual who has to face this task, and in doing so gains a share of the infinite. If there is a utopia for Baeck, it is the completion of the good on earth, because “[Judaism] possesses no such effective actions to bring heaven down to earth” (Baeck 1936, 5).

Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon (1888-1959) made connections between German philosophy and American theology. For him, religion manifested itself in social life. Since brotherly relations between all of humanity is already defined as the goal in the Torah, the covenant and election of the Jewish people are not an expression of particularity, but instead a task and obligation to spread the truth in the service of God. Cohon saw messianism as the essence of Jewish

optimism, resulting from the hope for “the ultimate triumph of justice over wickedness, of love over hate, and of social harmony over chaos” (Cohon 1962, 226). If the idea of messianism were freed from all legend and poetic fantasy, the core of the messianic idea would remain, consisting of the spiritual and moral regeneration of humanity and the creation of a new social order (Cohon 1962, 227). By creating of legends about the figure of the Messiah, Judaism helped bring about Christianity. Throughout Jewish history, however, scholars repeatedly criticized visionary ideas from the realm of dreams. Drawing on the work of Hermann Cohen, Cohon sees salvation in this world. The establishment of the Kingdom of the Almighty finds its expression in the work of perfecting humanity. Hope is directed toward the future, which will bring redemption not only for Israel, but for humanity. Even setbacks, he explains, cannot stop human development (Cohon 1962, 230). “An ideal social order need not forever remain visionary utopia. Faith in man as well in God furnishes the ground of the belief in the ultimate realization of the Kingdom of God on earth” (Cohon 1962, 233).

7. The Messiah Concept after the Shoah

After the National Socialists seized power at the end of January 1933 and the dramatic impact of this event on the Jewish community, changes in Jewish theology were initially cautious but increasingly clear. Nineteenth-century Classical Reform’s interest in a universalization of Judaism gave way to a more particularist agenda, and also led to a revision of earlier objections to Zionism. Even the Jewish reform movement in the USA began to advocate more loudly for a Jewish nation-state. The fact that this element was taken up again did not prevent the authors of the 1937 Columbus Platform from holding on to the idea of cooperation between all humanity in the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Hope for the emergence of a universal humanity was based on the universal pursuit of justice, truth, and peace. “We regard it as our historic task to cooperate with all men in the establishment of the kingdom of God, of universal brotherhood, justice, truth and peace on earth. This is our Messianic goal.” (*Declaration of Principles* 2022). Nazi policy made people aware of the danger to Jewish existence in the diaspora, but restorative ideas remained in the background. This changed after the Shoah, when the full extent of the annihilation became known. The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 was not only touted as a political necessity; the need for a spiritual and cultural center in Israel became increasingly evident in liberal circles as well. The founding of the state was filled with longing for the messianic era (Hertzberg 1973, 76).

Rabbi Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) and Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum (1897-1976) are two figures who demonstrated that Judaism's belief in progress could not be shaken even by the Shoah. The essence of Jewish self-understanding, according to Fackenheim, consists of the commandment to steadfastly assert God's will on earth: "The Jew of today can endure because he must endure, and he must endure because he is commanded to endure" (Fackenheim 1970, 92). In the face of total annihilation, Fackenheim saw hope as the 614th commandment: "we are commanded to hope" (Fackenheim 1970, 88; see: Fackenheim 1978, 23).

Liberal Judaism's skepticism toward the rabbinical conception of a world-to-come remained incomprehensible to him, because the concept of a world-to-come is inherent in a development toward it; without an "afterwards" there could be no development in this world either.

Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum, a student of Rosenzweig, declared that Jewish messianism was movement: "From one moment to the next, we must be prepared for change. We cannot know what God will ask of us under the new conditions of a new day [...]" (Lotter 2010, 137). In contrast to Christianity, he argued, Judaism posed no dualism between religion and world; this enables dynamic action that finds its expression in righteousness and mercy – in this world – "so that Esau can become what Jacob is" (Maybaum quoted in Lotter 2010, 143). The idea of Jewish messianism can be found in Maybaum's belief that God will win in the end and that culture, progress, humaneness, and civilization would merge into all of humanity. As bearers of cultural values, it is thus incumbent on Jews to promote human progress.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was far more than just symbolic in character, but it only led to a pragmatic politics of preservation and consolidation (Schweid 1992, 54); it was unable to lay claim to any discernible step toward a messianic age for itself or humanity. But armed conflicts with neighboring Arab states led to an ideological radicalization of the political elite as well as the religious blocs of Israel and the diaspora (Schweid 1992, 55). In the process, ultra – orthodoxy reshaped itself, declaring the State of Israel to be a "religiously neutral phenomenon" (Ravitzky 1991, 44) that had no meaning for the Jews in their relationship with God and the Torah¹⁷.

The founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983), however, attached great religious importance to the state of Israel for the existence of the people of Israel. For Kaplan, throughout history messianism was an important element for the preservation of the Jews because the certainty of a privileged position granted by the covenant with God protected them from doubt. But in modern times, however, this became obsolete: "These

¹⁷ On different orientations in modern Judaism, see Walter Homolka (2006).

conceptions have become almost unintelligible to him.” The world is subject to a force, like a magnet that attracts everything towards perfection: “This power itself is God” (Kaplan 1957, 511). God himself is the Redeemer who leads the people of Israel, in their covenant with him, toward an ideal of the end-time with all of the features of the messianic age. Reconstructionism aims to overcome the “traditional currents” of Judaism and to show a future beyond orthodoxy and liberalism. The unclouded positive idea of progress was subject to a revision, and restorative elements regained their importance. In conservative circles, the establishment of the State of Israel was not just a political necessity, but the fulfillment of a religious hope.

In addition, there were still voices who considered the concept of a personal Messiah to be viable – albeit in symbolic form (Schwarzschild 1973, 229-241). Steven S. Schwarzschild (1924-1989) raised fundamental criticisms about the process of universalization and depersonalization of the messianic idea: “We have learned from religious as well as non-religious existentialism, that all moral reality, as distinguished from nature or mathematics, is the reality of persons. Man, the person, is the *locus* of ethics, not ages, ideas, or forces. The messianic age is a utopia; the Messiah is a concrete, though future, reality” (Schwarzschild 1973, 133).

Schwarzschild saw Jewish messianism as an ethical movement that would lose its strength if it were uncoupled from the figure of the Messiah. Only a personal Messiah underlines the importance of the individual. His criticism applies to the universalization of utopian messianism as well as to Zionism, which as a national messianic movement also weakens the importance of the individual, because the emphasis on the importance of the country means that the ethical actions of the individual are of secondary importance. The highly symbolic function of a personal Messiah is to show people that the pursuits of earthly life should serve perfection.

For the Jewish sociologist of religion Will Herberg (1901-1977), messianism was an integral part of the Jewish tradition, but since the idea is extremely abstract, it requires a symbolic personality – the Messiah. Through him, life on earth receives a narrative with a meaningful function (Herberg 1951, 281f). However, the story only gains meaning from the covenant between God and the Jews, which is the actual catalyst of the redemption process. The process of redemption will only be complete when it extends to all of humanity and only when it is over will it become recognizable to humanity (Herberg 1951, 271).

Eugene B. Borowitz (1924-2016) turned to Hasidic history to describe his expectation of messianic time. “Should someone tell you that the Messiah has appeared, may I urge you not to start studying the relevant biblical texts, as valuable as that might be; instead go to the window and see what is going on

in the world” (Borowitz 1977, 78). In his opinion, discussion about Jewish messianism is drowned out by Christian rhetoric and by Christian conceptions of salvation (Hebrew: *jeschu‘a*) and redemption (Hebrew: *ge‘ula*). When these concepts are translated back into the Jewish tradition, something inauthentic penetrates into Jewish theology. However, Messianic hope is certainly a crucial aspect of Jewish faith, he argued, which on the one hand serves to revive Jewish piety and on the other hand has ensured survival through the centuries, not least in times of existential catastrophes such as the Holocaust (Borowitz 1977, 68). The scope of messianic ideas is particularly evident in rabbinical literature – from extreme social upheaval and natural disasters to the creation of a universal, ideal social order. Borowitz critically notes that apocalyptic elements found their way into the rabbinical writings with the development of the messianic idea, but they were deliberately kept vague in order to prevent speculation about the appearance of the Messiah: “I am suggesting that rabbinic literature makes law, not apocalyptic vision, central because Jewish faith is dominated by the Torah God has given, not the Messiah God will yet bring. [...] “We have learned that the survival of the Jewish people is of highest priority and that in carrying out our Jewish responsibilities we help move humanity toward its messianic fulfillment.” (Borowitz 1977, 76). The Jews will know who the Messiah is as soon as they see him: “Until sinfulness ceases and well-being prevails, Jews know the Messiah has not come” (Borowitz 1977, 81). Borowitz is skeptical about people’s ability to perfect humanity on their own; “I emphasize the Messiah’s humanity” (Borowitz 1977, 85). The revival of the Messiah creates space for the recognition of God’s role in history. It is the insight of modern people that they need God’s support. “Accepting God as true partner does not require us to surrender the sense of healthy self-reliance we identify with personal maturity” (Borowitz 1977, 86). This reflects Borowitz’s desire to remind believers of the covenant with God. The Jews’ commitment to God, the Torah, and Israel must take center stage over the individual autonomy that was emphasized in the early days of Reform Judaism.

The covenant with God as grounds for the idea of the Messiah has thus gained in importance again in recent decades, for example with David Hartman (1931-2013). The Israeli – American religious philosopher and Orthodox rabbi emphasized the secularity that characterizes the Jewish messianism. “Jewish messianism is not an otherworldly category, not an offer of salvation to the individual, but a historical hope for a renewed community” (Hartman 1985, 206). He saw God’s covenant with the people of Israel at Sinai as the transfer of responsibility to the people to fulfill a duty in history. “Jews have always had to ask themselves what expectations are fulfilled or disappointed” (Hartman 1985, 204), because the covenant of God is inseparable from the mitzvot and the divine promise. The failure of the messianic movements in

history is proof that God does not intervene miraculously to make human actions successful. With the Torah, God gave people a tool through which he could continuously influence human behavior. "Creation and revelation necessarily lead on to redemption" (Hartman 1985, 256). For Hartman it is of central importance that the covenant makes the idea of the Messiah and messianic time superfluous: "I am merely claiming that those eschatological beliefs are not constitutive of the Sinai covenant [...] The covenant can retain its vitality even when those beliefs are not adduced in its support or when they are given a demythologizing reinterpretation" (Hartman 1985, 257).

8. The Messiah Concept Today

We have seen that even in modern times the messianic idea, and even the idea of a personal Messiah, retained some of its earlier fascination. In modern times, Jewish conceptions of the Messiah in theology but also in art and literature, contain national and universalistic, rational and apocalyptic, legal and antinomic, political, metahistorical, and metapolitical elements (Dubbels 2011, 10), all of which refer to the tradition of the Jewish people and its exegesis. Hope for the Jewish Messiah in our times, however, generally no longer presupposes a personal Messiah. The focus is on the expectation of a messianic time. "In any case, it is constitutive for all forms of Jewish messianism to expect the realization of redemption in this world. [...] As long as there is injustice, lust, persecution, and suffering on earth, messianic promises cannot have been fulfilled" (Hahn 1999, 142).

The reverse is also true: wherever hopelessness and unjust treatment have caused people to seek help and long for God's intervention, the idea of a "redeemer" can't be far off. European history offered plenty of crises for the Jewish communities to hope for a Messiah, but this hope has always been disappointed. Euphoria was followed by disillusionment and despair (Werblowsky 1992, 45).

Unsurprisingly, the concept is also met with a certain amount of mistrust: those who have learned that they cannot count on outside help tend to rely on their own resources.

Leo Baeck describes two contrasting types of religion in his work *The Essence of Judaism*: "classical" and "romantic" religions, which correspond to the tension between "secrets" and "commandments." Where does the idea of Jewish messianism fall? The answer is just as clear today as it was for Baeck at the beginning of the twentieth century: in the realm of secret, euphoria, and ecstasy. According to Baeck, in Judaism, the human being called on by God via law bears the essential responsibility for the success of creation. This idea developed with the emancipation of Judaism in the nineteenth century and was

linked to the rationalism of Kant and Hegel. It thus became possible in modern Judaism to defuse the national undertones of the messianic idea as the goal of regaining statehood and to transfer the idea of the completion of God's creation through the work of the Messiah to the whole of Israel. Talmudic material can also be referenced in support of this idea, when Sanhedrin 98a speaks of the fact that general conformity with the law will nearly force the arrival of the Messiah. Modern hopes thus emphasize a "messianic time of universal knowledge of God and human love" (Kohler 1910, 291). In modern times, humanity's own responsibility and the need for ethical action replace the hope of miraculous redemption without losing sight of the goal of a peaceful and more just world. Rabbi Max Dienemann (1875-1939) makes this a virtual criterion for Judaism: "To be pious in Christianity means to feel the need for redemption and to long for redemption. For the Jew, all piety begins with the feeling that he is gifted with the strength for moral activity and that he must live according to this strength" (Dienemann 1925, 27, 34).

Though the idea that the individual is called upon to exercise moral self-responsibility is central in Judaism, it is also noticeable that current Jewish theology invokes the goal of "bringing about the messianic age" ever less frequently. Instead, since the American civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, conversation has centered around taking part in "healing the world" (*tikkun olam*).

This term has been used since the Mishnah, written by Maimonides in the twelfth century, and since the fourteenth century it has been part of the Aleinu prayer at the end of Jewish religious services. We have already come across it in the Lurianic Kabbalah, and the Maharal of Prague used it. In the process, *tikkun olam* has undergone repeated change in meaning. The concept of *tikkun olam* is based on the three central biblical pillars of social life – *tzedakah* in the sense of justice, the *mishpat* in the sense of social law, and *chesed*, kindness. Compliance with and implementation of these ethical principles of co-existence serves to improve the world on the way to an ideal (Jewish) society. Over time, the term *tikkun olam* has become so established that it can be used to describe and theologially classify any civil or social engagement on the part of Jewish communities and individuals.¹⁸ Thus, after its final heyday during German rationalism, the utopian concept of the Messiah has a model of interpretation in modern Jewish theology has shifted to the periphery. Hardly anyone invokes the notion of the messianic age when talking about the need to work toward perfecting God's creation. While messianic utopia has a universal undertone, the concept of *tikkun olam* underlines the particularistic orientation of today's Judaism.

¹⁸ On the concept of *tikkun olam* in Jewish theology, see: Elliot N. Dorff (2005, 7-20; 2008).

Wherever the idea of a personal Messiah and even an imminent expectation of his coming has persisted (e.g. in parts of Chabad Lubavitch), it nearly leads out of Judaism. One particular group is not in the focus of this essay: the “Messianic Jews”.¹⁹ Zionism, in turn, is the secular answer to the hope that all Jews would be gathered in their own land and has thus completely eclipsed restorative messianism.

For many Jews today, the mystical idea of an individual redeemer figure is not (or is no longer) compatible with Judaism’s claim not to allow any mediator or representative to stand between God and humanity. “Since from the beginning, emphasis was placed on the kingdom of God and not on the Messiah, more recent developments in Judaism could do without the personal Messiah” (Ben-Chorin 1979, 288).

Thus, conclusions about the messianic concept in Judaism remain vague today. Rabbi Louis Jacobs emphasizes that humanity knows little about the next world and how it will come to be, which leads him to the conclusion: “[...] we affirm our belief that God will one day intervene, that no good deed goes to waste, that the human drama will somehow find its fulfillment here on earth, that we do right to long and pray for God’s direct intervention. More than this we cannot say. We must leave it to God who alone knows all secrets” (Jacobs 1973, 300).

¹⁹ According to tradition Jewish sages like Gamliel II and R. Shmuel ha-Katan considered Jewish Christianity as a heresy, possibly already at the end of the 1st century. A parallel to the early gentile Christian communities, this movement became eventually a phenomenon of the past. In modern times, Jewish converts to Christianity who observe some Jewish practices have tried to assert the concept of Jewish, or Hebrew, Christians. In 1894, the Brownsville Mission to the Jews was founded by Leopold Cohn, a Hungarian immigrant to the United States who became a Christian. It relocated to Brooklyn and became the Williamsburg Mission to the Jews from 1897 until 1924. Known as the American Board of Missions to the Jews from 1924 until 1984, it has been known since then by its current name, Chosen People Ministries, supporting “faith communities that stress the Jewish context of the Gospel of Jesus.” (<https://www.chosenpeople.com/> 26 May 2022). Today, more than two hundred such groups of Messianic Jews are existing worldwide, including congregations in Germany, Poland, and Israel, with Jews for Jesus (founded in 1970) best-known. In September 2016, the 4th Russian Messianic Jewish Leaders Conference Warsaw, Poland, where Chosen People Ministries runs an office. Messianic Jews are commonly seen as proselytizers. While claiming that their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah would fulfill their Judaism, they are ostracized by mainstream world Jewry. The major Jewish denominations do not recognize their faith as a form of Judaism. In 1989, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that Messianic Jews’ belief in Jesus makes them Christians, thus ineligible for automatic Israeli citizenship (cf. Grossmann 2011, 397f). Among today’s leaders and advocates of this syncretic Christian religious movement are Manny Brotman, Martin and Yoanna Chernoff, Ray Gannon and Daniel Juster whose teachings are welcomed by gentile evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches.

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