**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Topics in *Hashkafa***

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**Shiur #16: The Messianic Era**

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In our previous *shiurim*,we discussed the eschatological concepts of *olam ha-ba* and the resurrection of the dead. In this *shiur*, wewill discuss a this-worldly eschatological stage – the messianic era. What will the world be like when the *Mashiach* comes?

It is clear from our sources that the messianic era is not synonymous with *olam ha-ba*, but israther part of, or more similar to, this world. It is an earlier stage than *olam ha-ba*. What is it then, and how does it compare to *olam ha-ba*?

**Natural or Supernatural?**

The *gemara* in *Berakhot* (34b) quotes R. Chiya bar Abba, in the name of R. Yochanan, that all the utopian prophecies found in the *Nevi’im*[[1]](#footnote-2) are referring to the glory and splendor of the messianic era, and not to *olam ha-ba,* which is even more glorious. The prophets did not speak about *olam ha-ba*, since its greatness is beyond description.

Shmuel disagrees with R. Chiya bar Abba, arguing that the days of *Mashiach* will be the same as nowadays, the only difference being that the Jews will not be subjugated to foreign nations. Life will continue as usual, except that the Jews will be redeemed and will have an independent Jewish state in Israel. As proof of his position, Shmuel brings the statement of the Torah that there will always be poor people (*Devarim* 15:11). He understands that since there will be poverty as long as this world continues to exist, even in the messianic era, the utopian vision of the prophets must refer to *olam ha-ba,* and not the days of *Mashiach*.

This dispute is also found in *Shabbat* (63a) with regard to the question of whether there will be world peace in the messianic era. R. Chiya bar Abba holds that there will be no more warfare in the days of *Mashiach*, as Yeshayahu’s prophecy that “nation shall not take up sword against nation” (*Yeshayahu* 2:4) will be fulfilled. Shmuel, however, maintains that weapons will be necessary even in the messianic era, as nations will continue to engage in warfare (although the Jewish nation will presumably be consistently victorious).

Thus, the *Gemara* presents two specific examples of phenomena that will continue during the messianic era according to Shmuel but not according to R. Chiya bar Abba – poverty and warfare.

**Which Opinion do we Accept?**

Several Jewish philosophers, including R. Saadia Gaon,[[2]](#footnote-3) accept the view of R. Chiya bar Abba. In this world, when *Mashiach* comes, all the words of the prophets will come true. The animals will make peace with each other; the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the lion will eat straw, and babies will play in the viper's nest. The gates of Jerusalem will be built of precious jewels, and the light of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* will shine from one end of the world to the other. The spirit of prophecy will rest on the entire Jewish People, including even young children. The nature of the world in the messianic era will be very different from the world as we know it.

The Rambam, however, holds the opposite opinion, stating emphatically that the *Mashiach* will not necessarily perform miracles and wonders. As proof, he notes that R. Akiva and most of the sages of his generation believed that Bar Kochba[[3]](#footnote-4) was *Mashiach*, even though he did not perform any supernatural feats. The Rambam concludes that any king of Davidic lineage who is righteous and knowledgeable in Torah, brings the Jewish People to Torah observance, defeats our enemies on the battlefield, and rebuilds the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* is by definition the true *Mashiach*.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The Rambam emphasizes that there will be no change in the laws of nature.[[5]](#footnote-6) He explains that the prophecies of Yeshayahu were intended allegorically. The wolf will not literally dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will not lie peacefully with the kid goat; instead, this image is a metaphor for world peace. Our enemies, who are now wicked and bloodthirsty, will acknowledge the truth of the Torah and will refrain from robbery and warfare. We may not understand the metaphorical meaning of each detail of the messianic prophecies, but all will become clear when *Mashiach* comes.

The Rambam goes on to cite the statement of *Chazal* that there is no difference between now and the days of *Mashiach* except for *shi'abud malchiyot* – whether the Jews are enslaved and oppressed by the other nations. According to the Rambam, the prophets and rabbis yearned for the messianic era not so that they can rule over their enemies, and not so that the other nations should praise them, and not so that they can eat, drink and be merry, but rather only for its spiritual advantages. They yearned for the time of *Mashiach* only in order to be free of oppression, poverty, and war, so that nothing would distract them from learning Torah and growing in spirituality. In the messianic era, there will be no poverty or war. There will be no conflict or jealousy, as riches and luxuries will be bountiful and readily available to all. We will no longer have to work for a living and will be able to spend all of our time contemplating God. We will thereby grow in wisdom, beyond what is possible in the current world, and understand God at the maximal level humanly possible, ultimately meriting the eternal life of *olam ha-ba*.[[6]](#footnote-7)

At first glance, the Rambam seems to follow Shmuel, maintaining that the days of *Mashiach* will be a continuation of the natural world. He even quotes Shmuel’s famous dictum that there is nothing that differentiates between the current era and the days of *Mashiach* other than the Jews’ subjugation to foreign empires. He assures us that the messianic era will not be supernatural or miraculous.[[7]](#footnote-8)

However, as the *Lechem Mishneh[[8]](#footnote-9)* and other commentators point out, the Rambam cannot possibly follow the opinion of Shmuel, even though he cites Shmuel’s statement about the difference between our time and the messianic era. There are three proofs that he does not follow Shmuel.

First, Shmuel maintains that there will be poverty in the messianic era, whereas the Rambam writes that everyone will have plenty. Second, Shmuel holds that there will be warfare in the messianic era, and the Rambam writes there will be no war. Finally, R. Chiya bar Abba says that the visions of *Yeshayahu* and the other prophets will come true during the messianic era and that *olam ha-ba* is indescribable. Shmuel, however, holds that the prophetic utopian vision will not be fulfilled during the messianic era. Presumably, he holds that the prophets were describing *olam ha-ba*. The Rambam, in the context of his explanation of *olam ha-ba*,[[9]](#footnote-10) cites the formulation of R. Chiya bar Abba and states explicitly that the prophets described only the messianic era, whereas *olam* *ha-ba* is beyond description. As we have seen, the Rambam maintains that *olam ha-ba* is a purely spiritual realm, populated by souls without bodies. It is clear that the words of the prophets, who speak in purely physical terms, cannot be relevant to a purely spiritual *olam ha-ba*!

The commentators therefore conclude that the Rambam held like R. Chiya bar Abba, that the messianic era will be fundamentally different from this world. However, unlike R. Saadia Gaon, the Rambam held that the differences would be completely natural and not miraculous. The visions of the prophets will be fulfilled during the messianic era not in accordance with their literal, supernatural meaning, but rather in a metaphoric fashion that does not contradict the laws of science.

What compelled the Rambam to re-interpret the words of the prophets in a non-literal fashion? The Rambam here follows an axiom that he established in the *Moreh Nevuchim.*[[10]](#footnote-11) According to the Rambam's understanding of physics and metaphysics, God created the world in such a way that the laws of physics will never change as long as the world exists. The words of the prophets clearly cannot come true in *olam ha-ba*, which is non-corporeal and indescribable by human language. Therefore, they must be fulfilled in the messianic era, which is part of this world. But since the laws of nature never change in this world, the Rambam had no choice but to interpret the messianic prophecies as metaphors. The messianic world will be a utopia, but a natural utopia. Lions will still devour their prey and vipers will still inject their venom, but humans will be enlightened by the philosophy of the Torah and rise above all of their vicious ways.

If we perfect our characters, according to the Rambam, we can bring about a perfect world without recourse to supernatural means. We can eliminate war and poverty, end jealousy and hatred, ensure plenty for all, and educate all of humanity to pursue nothing other than wisdom and spirituality.

**Summary**

There are three different opinions about what will happen in the messianic era. Shmuel believes that the Messianic era will be the same as today, but with political independence. The messianic era is thus merely an improved version of the contemporary State of Israel. According to R. Chiya bar Abba, as interpreted by most Jewish philosophers, the messianic era will be completely different from existence as we know it. It will be a supernatural existence, where lions will be tame, snakes will no longer bite, the streets will be paved with precious stones, and the light emanating from the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* will eclipse the sun. The Rambam presents a third view of the messianic era, based on a different interpretation of R. Chiya bar Abba’s view. According to the Rambam, the world will be completely different, and the words of the prophets will come true. However, it will not be a supernatural world, but rather a natural utopia. It will be the most perfect world that we can possibly imagine within the natural order. All of our needs will be provided with a minimum of effort, and we will be able to devote our entire lives to intellectual and religious growth. Nature will not change one iota, but human nature will undergo a fundamental transformation.

**The Transition from this World to the Messianic Era**

How will the messianic era begin? R. Saadia Gaon, who champions the supernatural understanding of the messianic era, believes that *Hashem* will reveal the *Mashiach* suddenly and then visit wondrous plagues upon our enemies, redeem us, and miraculously rebuild the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. The Ramah, R. Meir Halevi Abulafia, adds that even according to the opinion that holds that the messianic era will not be supernatural, the transition to the messianic era will be miraculous; the *Mashiach* will arrive with miracles and wonders.[[11]](#footnote-12) Rashi and Tosafot write similarly that the future Third Temple will not be built by human hands, but rather will descend miraculously from Heaven.[[12]](#footnote-13)

As we noted above, the Rambam has a different view. He states that if a righteous king arises who leads the people to greater Torah observance, conquers our enemies, and rebuilds the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, then he is definitely the *Mashiach*.[[13]](#footnote-14) Since the Rambam holds that the *Mashiach* is not required to perform miracles,[[14]](#footnote-15) it is clear that the *Mashiach* will attain his rule and military victory through natural means; he will build the Third Temple with a construction crew and a supply of building materials.

This disagreement may have concrete practical ramifications. We certainly hope to find out soon which understanding of the messianic era is correct. In the meantime, however, according to Rashi and Tosafot, we should focus on Torah and *mitzvot* and wait faithfully for the Temple to descend from heaven, whereas the Rambam might encourage us to start preparing blueprints. When the time comes, according to the Rambam, we will not be merely passive recipients of Divine grace, but rather God's agents in bringing about the redemption and realizing the potential for perfection within the natural order.

1. Many of these prophecies are found in the book of *Yeshayahu*, chapters 40-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Emunot* *Ve-De’ot*, ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The Rambam records his name as “Ben Kuziba.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. 12:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid. 12:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See *Kesef Mishneh*, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:7 and *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:1, who assumes that the Rambam follows Shmuel’s opinion. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Lechem Mishna, Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Moreh Nevukhim* 2:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Iggerot* *Ha-Rama* 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Sukka* 41a. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid. 11:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)