Introduction

There is one part of this work that should not require elaborate defense: that we live in an age of despair. The planet is getting more crowded, and for many of its inhabitants, violence, hunger, inadequate medical care, and race hatred are commonplace. In the twentieth century, nuclear and environmental disaster became real possibilities. The threat of terrorism is now a fact of life for just about everyone and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. With few exceptions, the richest economies in the world still suffer from boom-and-bust cycles and confront chronic unemployment. In many, income distribution is heavily skewed toward the rich, and public debt has reached dangerous levels.

According to the most recent census, 14.3 percent of the U.S. population, or 43.6 million people, live in poverty. There are as many guns as people – perhaps more. For too many people in the inner cities, life resembles Thomas Hobbes' description of a state of nature: nasty, brutish, and short. As of this writing, no consensus has emerged on how to address these problems, which means they will probably not be addressed at all. One reason for this sorry state of affairs is that public debate has become ugly and acrimonious. Increasingly the question is not "Where are the people who can lead us out of this mess?" but rather "Are we willing to be led at all?" In its 2009 year-end issue, the *Economist* magazine wrote, "The forests are disappearing; the ice is melting; social bonds are crumbling; privacy is eroding; life is becoming a dismal slog in an ugly world."

This is not a book about how to grow more food, save the environment, pay off debt, or get the Mideast peace process back on track. I will leave such things to others not only because I lack the expertise to tackle them, but also because they are not issues to which religion has anything specific to say. Rather, this is a book about a question to which religion does have something to say: whether one is justified in looking at the evils of the present situation and being hopeful about the future. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam hold out the promise of a better future. Can a rational person accept them, or does acceptance amount to nothing but wishful thinking? I will argue for the former, making every effort to avoid the latter.

There are a number of people whose written work, critical comments, and ongoing dialogue continue to be a source of inspiration. They include Michael Morgan, Adriano Fabris, Menachem Kellner, Regina Schwartz, Lenn Goodman, David Novak, Haim Kreisel, David Shatz, James Diamond, Alan Mittleman, Gary Saul Morson, Stefano Perfetti, and Leora Batnitzky. I also would like to thank the Tikvah Project on Jewish Thought at Princeton University for organizing a highly effective working group on messianism. Its members included Michael Morgan, Steven M. Wasserstrom, Shai Held, Benjamin Pollock, Annette Y. Reed, Steve Weitzman, and Elisheva Carlebach.

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Messianism and Mythology

The standard account of Judaism holds that its chief contribution to world culture is monotheism: the belief that everything owes its existence to a single, all-powerful deity. The truth is, however, that it is responsible for another idea that is equally profound: the belief that the future will be an improvement on the past or present. According to Maimonides, whereas the truth of monotheism can be demonstrated by reason alone, the direction of the future cannot. One can be a monotheist and also believe that human history is static, circular, or even degenerative. Despite the difference in the epistemic status of monotheism and belief in a better future, Maimonides (*MT* 14, Kings and Wars, 11.1) leaves no doubt about the importance of the latter[1]:

King Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former state and original sovereignty.... He who does not believe in a restoration or does

[1] On what basis does Maimonides say that belief in the coming of the Messiah is part of the teaching of Moses? His argument is based on several passages. Among them, Deuteronomy 30:3 ("gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you") assumes that the people are already in exile and claims that their fortunes will be restored and they will be brought back together if they follow the commandments. Numbers 24:17, the oracle of Balaam ("I see him, but not now"), is taken as a reference to David, and the next line ("I behold him, but not near") is taken as a reference to the Messiah. Finally, Deuteronomy 19:8–9 says that if (or when) God enlarges Israel's territory, as he swore to do, Israel must add three additional cities of refuge. Because this commandment was never fulfilled, and God commands nothing in vain, Maimonides concludes it will be fulfilled in the days of the

not wait the coming of the Messiah denies not only the teachings of the prophets but also those of the Law of Moses our Teacher.

These words were written in a time of exile and oppression. They offer hope that the current state of things is not ultimate and that someday not only Israel, but also, according to Maimonides, the rest of humanity will be redeemed. It is in this sense that Pierre Bouretz is able to characterize Jewish thinkers as "witnesses for the future" in the darkest hours of history.[2]

Traditional Jews will recognize that a prayer for the coming of the Messiah is part of the *Amidah*, "The Eighteen Benedictions," recited three times a day. It also constitutes the twelfth of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles, whose acceptance, in his opinion, is necessary for salvation. In a history often dominated by death and destruction, praying for the Messiah is more than an empty ritual. As Steven Schwarzschild notes, Jews in the ghettos, in concentration and extermination camps, in Warsaw, and among partisans and Holocaust survivors made Maimonides' twelfth principle their universal anthem.[3] To be sure, the Messiah did not come, a fact they surely must have foreseen. It is important, however, that their belief that he *will* come at some point allowed them to face their plight with a measure of dignity. The human condition is not tragic; the forces of evil will not win out. Eventually suffering will end, and mankind will fulfill its destiny.

Unfortunately, belief in the coming of a Messiah is deeply problematic. From a Jewish perspective, the historical record offers overwhelming evidence against it. If despite all the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people over the course of their history, no legitimate Messiah has stepped forward, has this belief not been shown to be groundless? Worse, the messianic zeal created by illegitimate messiahs raises false hopes and often leads to destruction and death. Yet for all the problems associated with messianism, the historical record also shows that it is an idea with enormous staying power. The prayer book mentions it on page after page. The great Jewish philosophers of the medieval

Messiah. Needless to say, these arguments are not intended for skeptics and would be questioned by modern scholarship.

[2] Pierre Bouretz, *Witnesses for the Future*, 11. I regret that this massive work came into my hand too late for extensive comment.

[3] *PI*, 211.

and modern periods all wrote about it. Secular thinkers in the twentieth century returned to it and reformulated it. As we have just seen, victims of the Holocaust invoked it in the last few minutes of their lives. The purpose of this book is to examine the staying power of this idea and formulate it in such a way that we retain its redemptive force without succumbing to mythology.

THE IDEA OF THE FUTURE

Even the most casual reader cannot fail to notice that the Hebrew Bible is future oriented. Without any sort of prelude or introduction, it opens with the words "In the beginning," which, on any reasonable interpretation, implies that it is legitimate to ask about the middle and end. The linear structure of the narrative is confirmed by the fact that many of the stories that follow involve journeys: Abraham's travel to a new land and to a mountain where he is supposed to sacrifice his son, Jacob's efforts to flee danger and find peace, Joseph's journey to Egypt, and the Exodus from Egypt and journey through the wilderness. Yet unlike the *Odyssey*, which also recounts a journey, these stories generally involve people going to places they have never seen before.[4]

In addition to the theme of futurity, there is also the theme of novelty. For the most part, the events narrated in the Torah are not variations on a familiar theme but turning points that change forever the way we view human behavior: the fall from Eden, the Flood, the call of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is with this background in mind that we can appreciate Isaiah 43:18–19: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do something new." In fact, the biblical view of history has become so much a part of our way of thinking that we need to step back to appreciate how things could be otherwise.

For the ancient Greeks, the world is eternal, and the order we perceive is rooted in the essential nature of things. The job of the philosopher is not to ask how the world came to be but what that nature is.[5] This approach is apparent not only in the philosophic tradition, in which

[4] For the comparison with Homer's *Odyssey*, I am indebted to Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 10–17; cf. Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis*, 13.

[5] It has been argued that Plato's *Timaeus* is an exception, but see my *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, chap. 2, for an argument that it is not.

change (becoming) is regarded as a defect or falling away from permanence (being), but in the writing of history as well. In the introduction to his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides claims,[6]

> The absence of the fabulous may make my work dull. But I shall be satisfied if it be thought useful by those who wish to know the exact character of events now past which, human nature being what it is, will recur in similar or analogous forms. It has not been composed to win temporary applause but as a lasting possession.

Nothing in Thucydides' account of the war rules out the possibility that over the course of history, empires will rise and fall and the political map of the world will change. On the contrary, he is convinced such upheavals are inevitable. His point is that, however devastating, they will not alter human nature, so that the categories we now use to explain it will apply equally well in other contexts. Conspicuous by its absence in this account is any promise of a final redemption.

Thucydides' view contrasts sharply with that of the Hebrew prophets, whose overriding conviction is that despite the depths to which human behavior has fallen, the universe we inhabit is not chaotic, and the day is coming when justice will prevail. Whether we think of this as a future time (the Day of the Lord) or the ascendancy of a particular person (the days of the Messiah) is insignificant. The point is that if things can – and eventually will – get better, the way they are now is not the way they have to be. Although mankind now lives in deplorable conditions, and the histories of individual people may have terrible endings, no cosmic principle guarantees that the strong will always prevail, that the weak will always suffer, or that disaster is inevitable.

If this were a self-help book, I would launch into a discussion of the therapeutic effects of hope – how people with serious illnesses or disabilities improved the quality of their lives by believing that their situations would improve. But it is not a self-help book, and I want to avoid such claims. My contention is that belief in the idea of the future is not just a way of coping with misfortune. More important, it is a presupposition of moral behavior. According to Kant, "The hope for better times, without which an earnest desire to do something that

[6] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.

benefits the general good would never have warmed the human heart, has always influenced the work of the well-intentioned."[7] Simply put, there would be no reason to work for the common good unless we believe that our efforts have some chance to succeed. This is another way of saying that our behavior will be better if we are convinced that the human condition is not inherently tragic – that the demands of morality do not impose a Sisyphean labor in which failure is the only outcome. Acceptance of this view changes significantly the way we view human behavior.

It is not enough to say that there are eternal standards of right and wrong – or even that if we live rightly, we will be better off. Beyond the question of right and wrong is the need to confront the future with optimism – to believe not only that one's own circumstances will improve, but also that suffering and oppression of any kind will be eliminated. It is in this sense that Hermann Cohen (*RR*, 261) could say that the concept of history is the creation of the prophet idea. Rather than measuring history by looking back to a Golden Age from which humanity has fallen away, the prophets measured it by looking to a future to which humanity must aspire. We can therefore agree with Karl Löwith that for the prophets history is not just a collection of facts but a story of fulfillment and salvation.[8]

THE FORMATIVE HISTORY OF JUDAISM

To understand how the prophets developed their understanding of history, it helps to view them as commentators on a narrative whose formative event is the Exodus from Egypt. The narrative begins with a band of slaves living in a strange land where they are oppressed by a cruel dictator. Their cry for help is answered when a charismatic leader comes before the dictator demanding that the people be set free. After a series of deadly confrontations, the slaves are told they are free to go. But the dictator changes his mind and sends his army to destroy them. Trapped between the advancing army and a large body of water, the people witness a miracle: The water parts, allowing them to walk

[7] Kant, "Theory and Practice," in *PP*, 309 (86). Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 81: "Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible."

[8] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 1.

to safety. After traveling through the wilderness for some time, the former slaves reach the homeland, where they can fulfill their destiny as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

It takes no great insight to see that the Exodus is the quintessential story of hope and redemption. As Michael Walzer remarks, our whole political consciousness is built up around it.[9] That consciousness involves everything from the fate of underdogs, to the arrogance of power, to the eventual triumph of good over evil. In addition to Passover, it is celebrated every week on the Sabbath and referred to prominently in the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

As is often the case with biblical narratives, there is more to the story than first meets the eye. In this case, hope and redemption turn out to be complicated. According to Exodus 14: 30–1, "The Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." Unfortunately, the people's mood of reverence does not last very long. Within a dozen lines of the "Song of the Sea," they become thirsty and begin to murmur against Moses. The foundation for their lack of faith is laid as early as Exodus 6:9, when Moses promises that God will liberate them and lead them to a new land: "Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel; but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and cruel bondage." The usual explanation for this is that slavery involves more than economic oppression; over time, it crushes a person's spirit and causes one to abandon hope.

Frightened and accustomed to following orders, the slave is often reluctant to seek a better life.[10] That is why the people cannot be taken to the Promised Land right away. If redemption is to be more than a deus ex machina, the people must first discard the slave mentality and accept the responsibilities of freedom, which is another way of saying that redemption must be earned if it is to be significant. So the story prepares us for the fact that the transition from slavery to freedom will not be easy. As any reader can see, the fledgling nation is about to

[9] Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 7.
[10] For further discussion, see *Exodus and Revolution*, 45–9.

embark on a series of disasters. The question is this: Will they succeed in transforming themselves or continue to think like slaves?

At Exodus 15:24, we learn that "the people" murmured against Moses, leaving open the possibility that only some of them lost faith.[11] Yet at 16:2, the mood of despair widens: "The whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron." The reason for their discontent is lack of food and water. They conclude that it would have been better to remain in Egypt ("when we sat by the flesh pots and ate bread to the full") than to die in the desert. The reference to flesh pots is important because it serves as a symbol of the slave mentality: Better to live under oppression with a full stomach than to go hungry as free men and women.

Did the people have full stomachs under Pharaoh's rule, or have the hardships of the desert made them long for "happy days" that never really existed? Whereas the early chapters of Exodus paint a picture of cruelty and oppression, by Numbers 11:4–6, the people refer to Egypt as the seat of luxury and comfort: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic." The most reasonable explanation for this is that the people's memory has begun to play tricks on them. Yet whatever explanation one prefers, the fact remains that the people show little interest in the spiritual task before them and seem more concerned with the practical question of when they are going to get their next meal.

Their lack of attention to spiritual matters reaches a climax at Exodus 32, when Moses is delayed on the mountain, and they ask Aaron to make gods (*elohim*) for them. Aaron responds by collecting gold jewelry and fashioning a statue of a calf. When the people proclaim the statue divine, Aaron builds an altar around it and announces that there will be a festival to the Lord the following day. At the

[11] According to Exodus 12:38, a "mixed multitude" suggesting slaves, political prisoners, thieves, and anyone else who might benefit from social chaos accompanied the Israelites on the Exodus. Some Rabbinic commentators try to put the blame for the people's lack of faith on this group. Thus Rashi suggests that the mixed multitude were responsible for the golden calf. The crux of his argument is that when the statue is presented to the people at Exodus 32:4, the text does not say, "These are our gods, O Israel," but rather, "These are your gods, O Israel." Exodus 32:26 implies that not every Israelite took part in this episode. On the other hand, when the mixed multitude are at fault, as at Numbers 11:4, the text says so quite clearly.

festival, the people are told, "These are your gods [*elohim*], O Israel, who brought you up out of the Land of Egypt."

Although the golden calf is often viewed as a paradigm of Israel's lack of faith, the text is ambiguous because *elohim* has a wide variety of meanings. In some passages (Genesis 1:1), it refers to the true God, in which case it takes a singular verb. However, it can also refer to false gods (Exodus 20:3), angels and heavenly creatures (Exodus 18:11), or anyone who exercises legal or moral authority (Exodus 4:16; 21:6). So when the Israelites ask Aaron to make them *elohim*, it is unclear whether they are rejecting God, introducing an unauthorized way of worshiping God, or expressing the need for an intermediary between God and the people.

Bull worship was widespread in the Near East, and according to a tradition that derives from the book of Joshua (24:14), the Israelites practiced idolatry during the Egyptian captivity. There are, then, good grounds for viewing the golden calf as a case of backsliding. One Midrash suggests, contrary to the biblical text, that the golden calf episode was responsible for the people's having to wander in the desert for forty years.[12] Beginning with the Book of Acts (7), early Christians argued that the golden calf constituted a violation of Israel's covenant with God, making it necessary for God to establish a new covenant. On the other hand, Rabbinic commentators like Rashi and Nachmanides point out that with Moses gone, the people thought they needed something infused with the spirit of God to continue to lead the way.[13] All we can say for sure is that the people's sin is great enough to make God want to destroy them. Only a desperate appeal for mercy on the part of Moses saves the day.

By the end of the Book of Exodus, the people are disappointed because the milk and honey they were promised have not materialized, and God is disappointed because the people have put more emphasis on food than on salvation. Still, the Book of Exodus does not end on an air of desperation. By chapter 39, we learn that work on the

[12] *Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, 30.7.

[13] For English translations, see *Chumash with Rashi's Commentary: Exodus*, 179–81, and Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah (Exodus)*, 549–57. For an excellent study of how the golden calf was viewed by later traditions, see L. Smoler and M. Aberbach, "The Golden Calf Episode in Postbiblical Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 39 (1968): 91–116.