

Part II

Skeptic: The more we discuss the Moshiach issue, the more it seems to me that it all boils down to a matter of perspective.

Believer: What do you mean?

Skeptic: The believer sees the world as an ordered and purposeful creation. Life is a process toward some end-goal, history's a journey with a destination. Evil, chaos and suffering don't fit in--so they're either some terrible mistake, or obstacles to be surmounted as part of the Divine plan. A world community united to serve the common good-- or, as you might call it, Moshiach--is the most natural thing in the world. Today's world is the surrealistic one, Moshiach's world is the sane reality. If that's the way you see it, then obviously everything points in that direction. All progress and improvement that we witness in our world is part of this cosmic progression to a messianic utopia. Anything bad that happens is but a temporary and superficial regression in our climb towards redemption, or perhaps the final gasps of the doomed forces of evil.

Believer: And the skeptic?

Skeptic: The skeptic sees the world as a hostile jungle in which right fades before might and the good die young. He is unabashedly out for number one and expects no different of his fellow man. If he meets a selfless individual he is awestruck and puts him on a pedestal or in a museum. He doesn't think that the world is headed anywhere in particular.

Believer: And which scenario, in your view, is more consistent with the objective facts?

Skeptic: They are both consistent with the objective facts. That's my whole point. Depending on where you stand, on what your gut feeling is, you will interpret history and your personal experiences accordingly.

Believer: Is the skeptic not moved by the velvet revolution in Eastern Europe? By the rise of freedom and democracy throughout the world? By the dismantling of nuclear arms, tanks converted into tractors, military aircraft airlifting food to the hungry?

Skeptic: Is the believer not disheartened by the slaughter in Bosnia? By the crime rate in Detroit? By the percentage of husbands who cheat on their wives? Again, if you see the world as a purposeful enterprise, the evening news and the history books tell of advancement and improvement, of currents of progression towards the messianic ideal under the surface of a still unperfected world. But if you view life as a series of disjointed, arbitrary events, the selfsame facts describe a jungle in which good things also sometimes happen.

Believer: But I think you're missing a crucial point. There's a major difference between the two perspectives you describe. One relies on data, on the "hard facts." The other makes its case by examining psychohistory of mankind, the deeper changes in the way that we think and feel which have been developing since the dawn of the human experience.

Skeptic: Explain.

Believer: Violent crime has no ideology--it is perpetrated, on the most part, by individuals who grew up in despair and are out for a dollar or a fix. There is no National Association of Child Abusers. There is no Nobel Prize for the year's most courageous hater. Things were not always this way. Four thousand years ago, sacrificing a young virgin was a sacred practice by the world's leading religions. Incest was not only legal--it was a sign of royal blood. Only a few centuries ago, destroying a city for its gold was an act of heroism, to be chiseled in stone for posterity. Closer to our time, slavery was commonplace, train robbers were folk heroes, torture was a means of criminal investigation, women were the property of their husbands---all this in the world's most enlightened countries. Our grandfathers remember when war

was a noble calling, romanticized by the world's leading writers and artists. The human race is maturing morally. Nothing emphasizes this more than the fall of totalitarianism in the former communist block: the sheer moral force of ideas proved more powerful than tanks and the gulag, bringing freedom to hundreds of millions. Again, I am not speaking about the way people act, but about the way they think and feel---what the global consensus was and now is on these issues. The atrocities being committed in Bosnia are as vicious as the pillage and rape in the wars of ancient Greece, but today the world is united in its outrage.

Skeptic: Does any of this make any real difference? If a person dies violently, G-d forbid, is it better that he be killed by a crazed junkie rather than by a “noble” soldier reveling in the sublime glory of war? He is no less dead and no less mourned by his loved ones. If we want a better world, the “hard facts” (as you call them) have to change, not just some abstract “collective conscious” of mankind.

Believer: You're absolutely right. Ultimately, what matters is the way people act. For the world of Moshiach to become a reality, all evil must be vanquished, both the behavioral evil and the “ideological” evil. But if we are to make sense (or nonsense) out of history, we must look at the more underlying causes for human behavior: the attitudes of society as a whole. When that changes, the ground is ripe for the real changes to take place. Look at what it takes to be “politically correct” today. In more and more parts of the globe, anyone who wishes to get elected or to stay in power had better espouse family values, democracy, equality, human rights, social justice...

Skeptic: Yeah, and if you want to be considered smart, just agree with everyone. You take these politicians seriously? Ninety-five percent of them are hypocrites!

Believer: And that proves my point more than anything else. If they were sincere but unpopular, it would mean that they are men of great integrity but that society is in a sorry state. But when the politicians sound too good to be true, you know that the man on the street is ready and receptive for some real changes in his life.