

Part IX

Skeptic: So when is this finally going to happen? At what point will the world suddenly be transformed into a Garden of Eden?

Believer: You know, one of the misconceptions that many people have about the coming of Moshiach is that they view it as a radical, earth-shaking event. The sky opens up, and this Divine being, whom no one has ever seen before, descends and instantaneously transforms the world. I think that this is a Christianization of the idea of Moshiach. Obviously, a world-view that sees the human being and the material world as intrinsically evil can envision the redemption only as a supernatural event, brought about by a supernatural redeemer. The Jewish concept of the redemption is that it is a process rather than an event. A process in which the underlying unity and perfection of creation unfolds as the true essence of every created being is realized. The world, as G-d created it, is perfect. Despite the fragmentation and conflict we encounter, its diverse elements are united by an intrinsic harmony and unanimity of purpose. The era of Moshiach is a time when this underlying harmony will be readily perceivable.

Skeptic: And today, in 1999, we're at the end of this process? Does the world look any less fragmented and conflict-ridden to you?

Believer: Absolutely. Think of all the areas in which layers of diversity are peeling away to reveal increasingly more unified realities at their core. Take, for example, physical science. When man first began to study the workings of his world, he identified many laws and principles which explained why things are the way they are. But the more he examined and tested these laws, the more they showed themselves to be but expressions of a more underlying set of laws--- a simpler, more concise and less numerous set of laws; in turn, these laws, too, were narrowed down to more inclusive fundamentals. Today, the stated aim of modern physics is to uncover the Grand Unified Theory that would encapsulate all of natural phenomenon in a single formula. The same is true in practically every other field. The economies of the world are grouping into common markets which are themselves becoming more and more integrated; the direction is toward a single global economy. Jet-age travel and the communications technologies are dismantling the barriers erected by culture and geography; we can already envision a time when all peoples of the world will comprise a single social unit. The final frontier of divisiveness is that of the human character: here we are still in the dark ages of fragmentary thinking. "What's in it for me" is still at the fore of our motivations. However, this is but the most external layer of the human self. If all aspects of creation ultimately reflect the unity and oneness of their Creator, how much more so the soul of man, which was formed in the image of G-d! Beneath our most external self and its narrow concept of self-fulfillment lies a deeper and truer self. A self that does not define itself in terms of the material and its gratifications, but in terms of its spiritual identity and quintessential function. On this level, self-fulfillment means the fulfillment of one's *raison d'etre*, the purpose to which one was created. It means the deepening of the focus of one's life from the superficial and divisive selfish "I" to an "I" that is defined in terms of the unified purpose of all creation.

Skeptic: And what about this "last frontier"? It seems to me that this is the greatest and most difficult challenge of all. We obviously still have a long way to go before humanity redefines its identity.

Believer: You'd be right if we were starting from scratch to build a better world. But this is an ongoing process, a process whose realization has been maturing as long as man has walked the earth. Throughout the generations, man's every positive act has been an assertion of the intrinsic goodness of G-d's creation. The good which has been achieved has been accumulating, the light intensifying and the darkness fading away. We are therefore in the position of a "midget standing on the shoulders of a giant", of a bricklayer setting the final brick of a magnificent mansion. The coming of Moshiach will not "change" the world any more than the final straw breaks the camel's back or the 212th degree of heat boils the water in the kettle.

Skeptic: Nevertheless, when you speak of Moshiach you mean more than a gradual change for the better. You do speak of an "event", of some point in time at which a certain individual, Moshiach, arrives on the scene and effects some very marked changes in the way things are.

Believer: Certainly. Let's go back to that final straw or that final increment of heat. The transformation is achieved by the combined effect of all the stalks of straw in the load and all the calories of heat produced by the fire. And yet, it is that final cumulative increment that serves as the catalyst for the change to actually take place.

Skeptic: But why must it be this way? Why must we be in the dark, unable to truly see the fruits of our labor until the entire "process" is complete? You are forever comparing good and evil to light and darkness. So why can't we actually see the light growing brighter and brighter? Why must darkness prevail until some "critical mass" of good has accumulated?

Believer: Ah, the dream of every man! To know everything, including the ending! To make sense of it all, to see the pieces of the puzzle falling into place! But if each positive act on our part would translate immediately into a perceptible change for the better on the universal scale, would we be faced with any real choices on how to lead our lives? To do good and to refrain from evil would be as obvious as the need to eat and to protect oneself from danger. Man would be little more than a trained hamster who jumps through a hoop for the anticipated morsel or a cow that learns to avoid the electric fence. G-d created man to be His "partner in creation", not a humanoid robot who follows a predictable course through a programmed life. So he placed us in a world in which chance and haphazardness superimposes the order and meaning implicit in our lives. In such a world, we are truly partners to His endeavor, "creators" as He is a creator: our efforts to move the world toward the fulfillment of His plan in creation are products of our choice and volition. We choose whether to live our lives by instinctive reaction to the material reality, or to use our capacity for insight and abstraction to see beyond the surface reality to our underlying purpose and mission. So this is the way it must be. Until the moment that the accomplishments of all generations of history culminate in the fulfillment of the Divine design, they must remain obscured by the veil of darkness and mundanely which conceals the accumulating light.

Skeptic: So we finally meet him.

Believer: Who?

Skeptic: The man who knows everything.