

Part XVII

Skeptic: You know something; I think that you are doing injustice to the idea of Moshiach with your unyielding orthodoxy. You insist on preserving the concept of Moshiach exactly as the Prophets spoke of it over twenty-five centuries ago: the return of all Jews to the land of Israel, the restoration of the royal house of David to the monarchy, a Holy Temple, sacrifices---the works. The idea behind all this is beautiful and inspiring: the quest for a peaceful and harmonious world, a world free of jealousy and hate, a world in which the pursuit of wisdom takes the place of today's rat race for power and material wealth. The Prophets expressed this in terms of their world, terms that hardly apply to our century. Why don't you take the gist of what "Moshiach" stands for and discard its out-of-date packaging? To my mind, your literal-minded approach colors your entire message with a biblical-religious flavor and detracts from its power and relevancy.

Believer: This brings us back to your earlier question, "Why bring G-d into the picture?" You felt that everything that we are speaking about--the inherent goodness of man, a meaning and destiny to life and history--could be conceived of without a supreme creator of life and author of history...

Skeptic: And you said that without G-d there can be neither objective definition of good nor a true sense of meaning to life. But even if Moshiach represents the Divine purpose and end-goal of creation, why must it include all the things I mentioned?

Believer: Well, it's either one or the other. Were the Prophets - prophets or merely social philosophers? Were they putting forth their own humanly conceived ideas--in which case we can take them or leave them or else take whatever we identify with and reject the rest--or were they indeed doing what they said they were doing, conveying the word of G-d to humanity?

Skeptic: Even if G-d did speak to us through them, it is still G-d speaking 25 centuries ago. Perhaps their words represent what that generation was to aspire to, while we must adapt these ideas to fit our times.

Believer: You know who you remind me of? You remind me of Feivel the Coachman.

Skeptic: Who is Feivel the Coachman?

Believer: A character in an old Chassidic joke. Once, a group of Chassidim decided that they wished to spend Chanukah with their rebbe. The only problem was that it was already a week before the festival, and no coachman was willing to guarantee that the long and difficult journey could be made in that time. Finally, they found Feivel, who, eager for the high price the chassidim were offering, agreed to their condition. "If am not there by Chanukah", Feivel promised cheerfully, "you owe me no thing." Anyway, they set out in the dead of winter and, as the father of all cynics put it, anything that could possibly go wrong, did. One of the horses slipped on an ice patch and broke its leg. The coach skidded off the road and had to be dug out of a snowdrift. They lost their way in the forest. You get the picture. In short, when Feivel and his coachfull of Chassidim finally hobbled into the Rebbe's courtyard it was two weeks after Chanukah. When Feivel realized that his passengers had no intention of paying him, he was outraged. He immediately summoned them to the town's rabbinical court. After carefully listening to the arguments offered by both sides, the presiding rabbi ruled that the Chassidim have no obligation to pay their hapless coachman. Now poor Feivel turned on the rabbi: "This is justice?! Have you no heart? I work myself to the bone for a month, and I don't get anything for my trouble?" Patiently, the rabbi tried to explain. "My dear man," he said, "I do not decide these things on my own--I can only rule by what the Torah says. According to Torah law, if a person makes a contract and is aware of all the implications of the agreement, he is bound by it. There is absolutely no other decision I could have arrived at." "You mean the Torah says that they don't have to pay me?" demanded Feivel. "Yes," replied the rabbi. "Aha!" cried the coachman triumphantly. "Now I understand. The Torah was given on Shavuot, right? On Shavuot the roads are perfect, the days are long, and the weather is beautiful. Of course! If I would have failed to make the trip in

time for Shavuos, they certainly ought not to pay me. But had the Torah been given on Chanukah, it surely would have ruled in my favor!”

Skeptic: That's a cute story, but still, you will certainly acknowledge that times can change in a way that does affect the way we orient our lives...