

## Interview

# Rabbi Harvey H. Spivak



*The difference between the Jewish and the Christian expectations of the Messiah.*

**S**habbat Shalom\*: In many religions, a very important topic is the expectation of the Messiah or Savior. How does Judaism differ in this aspect?

**Spivak:** It is important for Judaism, also. It has been important for many centuries and it continues to be an important topic. The longing for a Messiah and the longing for the period of time that this

figure represents goes back all the way to biblical times and has been important in the generations after that also. It is still important; it is part of our prayers. In every service there are prayers which contain an explicit wish for the Messiah to come, in which God is petitioned to bring the Messiah as He sees fit to do so.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Why do we need a Messiah? Couldn't God

have accomplished this by Himself without the need of a Messiah?

**Spivak:** God could have accomplished this without the need of a Messiah. In the Jewish point of view, it is not the Messiah who brings the era of peace at the end of time. It is God, the Creator, who does so. In the Jewish view, the Messiah is the messenger of God, something like a prophet, who has a message from God about this time and who will do the necessary actions. But the transformation of history to an era of peace will be God's action. So it is not the Messiah who brings the end of days, but it is God who does so.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Is there a

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**difference between the Jewish Messiah, as described in Old Testament scriptures, the *Tanakh*, and the Messiah described in the New Testament scriptures?**

**Spivak:** There is a difference and it is an important difference. It is one of the most important differences between Judaism's and Christianity's concept of Messiah. For Jews, the Messiah is a human being and not a God, not a divinity. That would be completely contrary to traditional Jewish beliefs. The biblical prophets spoke about a Messiah and talked about the Messiah as a human being.

The word "Messiah" in Hebrew means "anointed." An anointing with oil is an ancient ceremony for coronation of a king, so, essentially, the title "Messiah" is "king," a national leader. That's how the prophets imagined the Messiah. They believed the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. They believed the Messiah would accomplish an independence for the Jews in the land of Israel, and sovereignty in that land. They believed that, at that time, Jews from all over the world would come to this liberated land and would worship God together, and people of all nations would worship God and live together peacefully. That's the image of the time of the Messiah.

So, it's not only a description of the Messiah, it's also a kind of acid test. So, for a Jew, if you say, "Has the Messiah come?" a Jew would say, "Well, has the description of the messianic time been fulfilled?" The answer, obviously, is "no," therefore, the Messiah has not come.

Both before the time that Jesus lived and after the time that Jesus

lived, Jews—this is of course postbiblical time—still held to this idea, basically. The idea of a Messiah as someone who might come any year, any day, was very much alive during the time that

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Jesus lived. The Jews imagined the Messiah as someone who would be a national hero, even a military figure. It's no insult to the figure of Messiah to call him a military figure. Indeed, a century after Jesus lived, there was an important revolt of the Jews against the Roman authorities led by a man named Bar Kokhba. Bar Kokhba was not a rabbi. He was not a particularly religious or spiritual figure, although he was a friend to rabbis, notably Rabbi

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Akiva, who was one of the greatest rabbis at that time, one of the greatest rabbis in history.

Rabbi Akiva believed that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah. That

didn't mean that Rabbi Akiva thought that Bar Kokhba was a holy man in the sense that we would use that term, but Bar Kokhba was the one who would free the Jews from the Roman authority, liberate the land of Israel for Jewish sovereignty and initiate this time of peace, which is the time of the Messiah. Rabbi Akiva followed Bar Kokhba in the revolt against the Roman authority. The revolt was crushed. Bar Kokhba was killed and Rabbi Akiva said, in essence, "It looks like I made a mistake." Quite an admission for such a distinguished figure, but through the logic of his own beliefs, he had to say that. He had to say that Bar Kokhba is not the Messiah, because he didn't do what the Messiah is supposed to do, and this was obviously not that period of history. So we had to continue to wait.

There have been other messiahs, false messiahs in Jewish history, some of whom caused tremendous stir among Jews around the world, or at the very least locally and in some cases internationally. But in every case, of course, it became clear that this person was not the Messiah, and the Jews had to adjust to that fact. That phenomenon has continued as recently as this day. You may be familiar with the Lubavitcher Rabbi, the late Lubavitcher Rabbi in Brooklyn, whose followers believed he was the Messiah. He lived to be an old man and they were continually waiting for him to reveal himself in his full identity as the Messiah. He died, and they had to adjust. It was quite a radical adjustment. It was so difficult that some of them still have not made it and still believe that, even after death, the Lubavitcher Rabbi will find some

way to reveal his identity as the Messiah. It's a kind of—they would never say this—but it is a kind of belief in the second coming, although most of the followers of the Lubavitcher Rabbi, by now, have probably reconciled themselves to the fact that he was not the Messiah.

So, in any case, the Messiah is a very important figure in Jewish history, from ancient times right into contemporary times. But it is significantly different from the Christian concept in that the Messiah is not a divine figure and is not, in essence, different from other human beings.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Reading in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, it would seem that in the thirteenth century it was thought the Messiah, when he would come, would not bring an immediate difference, but would begin a process. Is that a currently held view, or if the Messiah were to come, would it bring an instantaneous change?

**Spivak:** There are actually differences of opinion among Jews, depending on what their personal theology is, and there has been for a long time. Nowadays, many Jews do not think of the Messiah as being an individual person, but think of the Messiah as being a time, a time of peace, for example. So that's apt to be gradual. You can't declare peace after one day. That's something that is still a matter of opinion to this day. Many Jews, particularly orthodox Jews, conceive of the Messiah as being an individual figure.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Who or what is the Messiah? Is he a man, a people?

**Spivak:** Traditionally, the concept of the Messiah is that he is a man. Nothing more than a man. Some people would rather think

of the Messiah as a time, an era, rather than an individual. There are differences of opinion about the matter.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What, if anything, would make the Messiah different from any other person? Could anybody be the Messiah?

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**Spivak:** It's an interesting question. People have asked that for time out of mind. How are we going to recognize the Messiah when he comes? The most basic answer to that is that when all of the prophetic descriptions are fulfilled, then we know that the time has come, even if we can't identify the individual.

Many legends have grown up about the Messiah. One of the popular legends, an ancient one which has persisted, is that the Messiah will be somebody who is an outcast of society. The person you would least expect to be the Messiah will turn out to be this great prophet and messenger from God.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Is that based on Isaiah 53, the suffering servant?

**Spivak:** No. Jews read Isaiah 53 in a different way. The suffering servant is Israel, rather

than an individual, but it is an ancient legend.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Do the Jewish people still wait for the Messiah and specifically, what do they expect from the Messiah?

**Spivak:** They expect the messiah will be a genuine messenger from God, assuming that they believe in an individual Messiah rather than a messianic era, and that it would be a time of true peace, when Jews will be gathered from the four corners of the earth to the land of Israel. Jews will have sovereignty over the land, and everybody will harmoniously worship God together.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Martin Buber had said, "When the Messiah comes, Jews and Christians will recognize him, and he will be the same Messiah." What do you think of this statement?

**Spivak:** Where did you get this statement, do you know? It's interesting. It would be interesting to see it in its context, because I don't understand it.

**Shabbat Shalom:** I think in its context, it is saying is that, ultimately, the Messiah the Christians expect and the Messiah that the Jewish nation, the Jewish people, expect would turn out to be one and the same. If that is what he is saying, what is your reaction to this?

**Spivak:** As I said, I don't understand it. Buber was a very learned man, and if he made a statement that doesn't make sense to me, it means there is something about the statement that I don't understand, so I really can't answer that question.

**Shabbat Shalom:** When and how will the Messiah come and can the Jews individually or corporately do anything to hasten or delay the Messiah's coming?

**Spivak:** We don't know when the Messiah will come, but there

is a very ancient tradition that people can do something to hasten the coming of the Messiah. It usually goes under the term of *Tiqqun Olam*. *Tiqqun Olam* means repairing the world. In other words, when we make the world fit for the Messiah to come, then the Messiah will come. When we do our part, then God will respond by bringing the time of the Messiah. Many people feel, this is a bit theoretical and you can't prove it, but many modern commentators feel that the widespread Jewish participation in the reform movements around the world in the last couple of centuries, participation that proportionately is far in excess of their percentage of the population, is a kind of expression of this ancient Jewish belief that we need to do something.

Traditionally this is balanced by a belief that we shouldn't, we don't have to, and needn't do everything. That is, we don't have to make the world into the Garden of Eden; we can't. So we need to expect that God will do His share.

Among the secular reformists, revolutionaries, and so on in the past couple of centuries in various countries, that balance has not been there. The underlying feeling, although they may not have expressed it this way, is that we have to do everything; we will make the worker's paradise, or whatever, by ourselves.

More traditionally, within the religious framework, is a balance between those two beliefs, that God will do His part, but we also have to do ours.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Personally, what do you most look forward to when the Messiah comes and why?**

**Spivak:** I have never asked myself that question. Maybe be-

cause it is hard to imagine exactly what that period of time would be like. So I don't know, although I wouldn't mind trying to get used to it.

***Shabbat Shalom:* So you are saying that for most Jews, the concept of the Messiah is more one of time, at least that's the emphasis? The Messiah would be a person, but what is more important is the time of what would happen after the Messiah comes?**

**Spivak:** That's right, that's right. It's true that if the Messiah is flesh and blood, then he will die. But presumably, that era that was initiated would continue, so it's the period of time more than the individual.

There is an interesting dichotomy in Jewish belief, you could call it balance, you could call it a tension, depending on how you want to look at it. One is the eagerness for the Messiah to come. The other is a feeling that, well, we have to be patient, because it may be a very long time.

Even back in ancient times, there was an old legend from one of the classical books, *Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai*; he lived in the first century, was one of the prominent figures in Jewish history. He said, if you are planting a young tree and they come and tell you "the Messiah has come," first, finish planting the tree and then go to greet the Messiah.

That says a couple of things to

me. First of all, it says there may be a hint of skepticism in his voice. If they say the Messiah has come, you are not yet sure that it is true.

Secondly, even if it is true, the coming of the Messiah does not mean the end of the world. You are still going to need trees. We are still going to have to do our part. We are still going to have work to do and responsibilities to fulfill, so don't think it's the end of the world or the end of what you need to do. Go ahead and

finish your work and wash your hands.

***Shabbat Shalom:* So, how do you see his coming as affecting both the Jews and Christians; people in general?**

**Spivak:** In general, Jews

do not speculate about the details of that time. It's also a Jewish trait about the afterlife. We have a strong belief in a life after death, but we don't do much in the way of speculating about what that life would be like. We leave it in general form and leave the details for whenever that time may come.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What would you like Christians to understand most about the Jewish concept of the Messiah?**

**Spivak:** Probably very few Christians understand the basic difference between the Christian and Jewish ideas of the Messiah. I think it would be educational for Christians to understand that, that it's a basic difference in Jewish belief.

It might also be helpful for

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Christians to understand what the Jewish idea of the Messiah probably was at the time Jesus lived. It's not clear whether Jesus, himself, thought he was the Messiah or not. He may have. Assuming, and this is a pretty safe assumption, that Jesus' values were essentially standard rabbinic Jewish values, he may well have called himself the Messiah, but he would have done so without calling himself a divinity, or saying that "I am somebody you should worship," because if he did call himself the Messiah, or think of himself as the Messiah, he was thinking of himself as a national Savior, a national hero, which might—not might, but very likely—could be interpreted in either political or military terms.

It's pretty clear both from the Christian Gospels and from other historical records that the Roman authorities probably reacted to Jesus in exactly that way, assuming that he was either a military or political figure, or both. They would naturally be antagonistic to him, be-

cause the last thing they wanted was any kind of political unrest among any of the provinces of the empire. I think it would be good for Christians to understand that.

**Shabbat Shalom:** So you are saying the Messiah would be a man, an ordinary person, who, by his example, by his teaching, perhaps through his military and political leading, would usher in a new period. But I don't see any divine intervention in that concept. Considering God's constant intervention in the history of ancient Israel, why isn't there a presence of divine intervention in the Messiah?

**Spivak:** There is. The understanding is that God will bring this period when He sees fit and, consequently we, to this day, pray for that period of time. There are prayers in every Jewish service—there are prayers for the Messiah, and the prayers are strictly prayers to God. They are not prayers about a person or to create the right kind of person, or prayers that any person should do

whatever magic things need to be done to usher in that period. They are strictly prayers to God that He may bring this period of peace as soon as possible.

**Shabbat Shalom:** With this period of peace, will the work continue in the sense that it's not a new beginning of time, but rather a continuation of time, with the hearts of people being changed?

**Spivak:** Well, the hearts of people will apparently be changed if it's going to be an era of peace. Whether it's through education or not, I don't know, but something will happen. The world will be the same, and we still, presumably, will have to work for a living.

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\*Michael Wise conducted this interview while a graduate theology student at Andrews University.

“Better is one hour of bliss in the world to come [*Olam ha-ba*] than the whole of life in this world [*Olam ha-zeh*]” . . . “Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than the whole life of the world to come” (*M. Avot* 4:17).