



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Acharon Shel Pesach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 14, 2012

Pesach

Who Needs Moshiach?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

Pesach > Acharon Shel Pesach > Who Needs Moshiach?

April 14, 2012

ABSTRACT

The eighth and last day of Passover week has a special connection to the Final Redemption – the future era of divine goodness and perfection to be heralded by the arrival of Moshiach – as reflected in the themes of today’s Haftarah from the Book of Isaiah, one of the primary prophecies for the End of Days.

The connection of last day of Pesach with Moshiach is underscored by the custom instituted by the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, to partake on this day of a Moshiach Banquet – a mirror Seder of sorts that includes matzah and wine.

Today is, therefore, an opportune time to speak a bit about the Moshiach, and try to decipher some of the mystery and controversy shrouding this topic. The biggest question of all is: What relevance does the Moshiach have for us? How do we explain to our children the importance of the Moshiach and the Final Redemption? And what can we do to help speed their arrival?

And, in this context, what is the significance of the Moshiach Banquet instituted by the Baal Shem Tov on this day?

Let us explore the potency of the last day of Pesach and see how we can tap into it in ways that will transform our lives, by teaching us how redemption – personal and global – is within our very reach.

This is a two-part sermon:

PART I: PASSOVER AND THE END OF DAYS

PART II: THE MOSHIACH’S BANQUET

The last section contains a few words relating the above to *Yizkor*.

WHO NEEDS MOSHIACH?

PART I: PASSOVER AND THE END OF DAYS

1. Lamb and Wolf (Humor)

Woody Allen famously said: “[At the end of days] the lamb and the wolf shall lie down together ... but the lamb won’t get any sleep.”

*

A man visits a zoo and is taken to the lion’s cage. He witnesses there the literal fulfillment of Isaiah prophecy – a lion and a lamb in a cage together.

Amazed, he calls over an attendant. “How long have you had a lion and a lamb in a cage together?”

“Over a year already.”

“How do you do it?”

“It’s easy. Every morning we put in a new lamb.”

2. Passover and Final Redemption

The eighth and last day of Passover week has a special connection to the Final Redemption – the future era of divine goodness and perfection heralded by the arrival of the Moshiach. As reflected in the themes of today’s Haftarah from the Book of Isaiah, which contains one of the primary prophecies for the End of Days.

[The connection of last day of Pesach with Moshiach is underscored by the custom instituted by the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, to partake on this day of a Moshiach’s Banquet – a mirror Seder of sorts that includes matzah and wine. The Baal Shem Tov would eat three festive meals on the last day of Passover. The third meal, which would be held toward the evening, was called *Seudas Moshiach*, because on the last day of Passover, he taught, there is a revelation of the light of Moshiach.]

Therefore, today is an opportune time to speak a bit about Moshiach, and try to decipher some of the mystery and controversy shrouding this topic. The biggest question of all is: What relevance does Moshiach have for us? How do we explain to our children the importance of Moshiach and the Final Redemption? And what can we do to help speed their arrival?

Let us explore the potency of the last day of Pesach and see how we can tap into it in ways that will transform our lives.

3. Jewish View of Moshiach and Redemption

The concepts of Moshiach and the Final Redemption are shrouded in many layers of misconceptions and distortions. On this last day of Pesach, when the light of redemption radiates, let us try to dispel some of them.

What exactly does redemption mean? Redemption from what? What will the world look like when Moshiach comes?

Briefly:

As Maimonides explains,¹ the Final Redemption ushered in by Moshiach will not necessarily be a miraculous event. It will actually be the end of a long process which will finally bring the world to its most natural place – a material universe aligned with its higher, spiritual, divine purpose ... a world that is a home for God ... a universe in which we all perceive materialism not as an end in itself, but as a means to a spiritual goal.

Understanding this is synonymous with appreciating that every good deed we do leaves a permanent mark on the universe, and when all these good deeds accumulate – like building blocks – a new structure called the Final Redemption emerges.

¹ *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Kings, ch. 12.

In simple English: What do you answer your children when they ask you, "Why should I be a good person? Why should I sacrifice my own needs to help another?"

Most of us, go for the common knee-jerk answers: "Because it's the right thing to do." Or, "Because God said so." Or, "Because it feel right and will make you feel better."

But are these adequate answers? What if your child argues: "I don't really care if God said so or if it makes me feel better? Or who says that this is the right thing to do? What about all those people who aren't that good and they feel all fine, and even prosper? At the end of the day, what difference does it make if I am good or not, when all of us - good or bad people - die anyway?"

Moshiach and the Final Redemption hold the ultimate answer:

No good deed dies. Our every action and choice affects the universe forever. Our good deeds will ultimately change the world - and that is why they are worth the effort today.

This is the only way to explain all the sacrifices by our ancestors, who for thousands of years invested their blood, sweat, and tears in order to serve God ... in order to live a just and charitable life ... to do whatever they were able to bring virtue and light into their environments, no matter how difficult the challenge. What difference did it all make if they ended up dying at the end?

A big difference.

Their bodies died but not their souls. Their mitzvahs and good deeds continue to live on - in us, in their children, in the world, in everything they touched.

The concept of the Moshiach represents the living light at the end of tunnel, the end product of all these millions upon millions of good deeds that people have been accumulating from the beginning of time.

4. Reality Defined

To further explain this, we must define reality.

A philosopher was arguing with a respected rabbi about the existence of God. The philosopher felt that, although there were some valid arguments for proving God's existence, there were many equally valid ones disproving His existence. After a time, the philosopher grew exasperated. "You are a wise man," he said to the rabbi. "Why is it that you are not moved by all the arguments disputing God's existence?"

The rabbi smiled. "I envy you," he said to the philosopher. "Because you are so involved in pondering the existence of God, you are always thinking about Him, while I spend most of my time thinking about myself." With that, they parted ways.

The philosopher was flattered by the rabbi's remarks, yet disturbed that his question was never answered. Later, as he was telling a friend about the encounter, his friend explained to him the deeper meaning of the rabbi's words. "The rabbi actually insulted you," his friend said. "The reason you spend all my time pondering God's existence is that you are sure that you exist; that is your given reality, so the only question you have is whether God also exists. For the rabbi, God's existence is a given; God is the true reality, so the eternal question is whether *he* exists, and if so, why?"

To most of us reality is what we see and hear and experience with our five senses. Reality is our tangible world and our physical life - the one in which we go to work each day, are faced with various pressures and challenges (financial, medical, social) and which includes all the other activities that constitute our daily routines. The spiritual, the sublime, the transcendental - these are not reality to us. They represent, at best, an aspiration and a dream, and at worst, an unrealistic fantasy and escape, unreachable as it is impractical.

Moshiach and the Final Redemption tell us this is not true.

Reality is the sublime that is concealed from our myopic view. Indeed, God created the universe in a manner in which we perceive our own existence as the intrinsic reality, and Godliness as something novel and acquired.

In order that we might be able to exercise our free will, God created an “agnostic” world, where His reality is not visible. He obscured His presence from us so effectively that we actually perceive ourselves as the only reality.

But, although we see God’s existence as something “outside” ourselves, the opposite is true. It is God who is real, while our existence is “outside.”

Our life’s mission is to achieve an entirely new level of perception, where Godliness is the absolute reality, and we are the novel creations, channels for divine expression.

That is what will happen at the End of Days. The world will be as it was always meant to be ... living up to its true purpose.

The Divine will no longer be concealed under layer upon layers of material shrouds, and we will see reality for what it is – the material world as a container, protecting the divine light within.

As the Prophet Isaiah tells us: “And the glory of God will be revealed and all flesh will see it together.”² For at that time, the Divine will permeate even the physical aspects of the world – even “all flesh.”

In simple, palpable terms: Moshiach embodies the time when all of existence will recognize the “hand inside the glove.” Instead of seeing the material surface as reality, and the divine spiritual energy within as abstract and distant, we will see that the divine energy is reality, and the outer material universe is its packaging.

²Isaiah 40:5.

5. Dawning of Redemption

When the redemption finally dawns, the physical world around us will not change; rather, we will change.

Maimonides states explicitly that redemption will not be an apocalyptic or supernatural event. The era of redemption (or “the Messianic age”), says Maimonides, will be a time when we are all absorbed in “knowing God.”

This means, in part, that people will perceive God in all their experiences. Whether a doctor or a businessperson or a parent, we will all see our material pursuits through the filter of sanctity – not as an end in themselves, but as means to a higher end. Just as a hungry person naturally craves food, we will naturally crave goodness. We will intuit what is right and wrong and act accordingly. No longer will there be a dichotomy between our hearts and minds, our bodies and souls, our internal and external feelings. We will all come to recognize that every detail of this universe is the work of God.

From where we stand today, I know this is hard to envision, but we must believe that this will happen – as God promised through the prophets – even though our own world would have us believe otherwise.

6. Imagine...

Imagine that you have lived your entire life in a dark tunnel. Your parents and grandparents lived there too, and so did their parents and grandparents. You have grown accustomed to the darkness and developed the necessary skills to survive. You move through life, sometimes staggering in the dark, at other times feeling your way along. You are totally resigned to the fact that this is what life is, and that it will continue to be so.

But you have been told or have read in some ancient books that long ago, your ancestors lived in a very different, well-lighted place. You have heard that there is indeed a light at the end of this tunnel, that you don't necessarily have to spend your entire life in darkness.

However, you are skeptical. After all, this darkness is the only life you know. After so many generations have lived in this tunnel, can you really believe some old tale about the possibility of another kind of life? And besides, you have learned to cope here, to make yourself comfortable in the darkness, so why would you want to risk changing things?

And yet, something inside tells you that the darkness is just not right for your life. No matter how accustomed you have become to it, you still feel restless and insecure. You realize that although the darkness may be a part of life, it is not life itself.

You know there is another reality ... a reality that offers hope ... a redemption from the darkness.

7. Redemption from the Darkness

We all yearn to be redeemed from being trapped in the darkness of the material world ... from a listless and aimless life ... from our doubts and fears ... from grief and guilt.

But meanwhile, we must live a life of paradox, where we are constantly pulled by two opposites: our body, which represents the material universe, and our soul, which represents the spiritual universe. Everything about our existence is marked by this dichotomy. We live in a world that is imperfect, and yet we search for perfection. We live a life full of pain and difficulty, and yet we fight for peace and harmony.

The same is true on a collective and global scale. From the beginning of time, people have invested their hearts and minds to make life a little bit better. We have created new political and economic systems, we have pursued education and enlightenment, we have developed industry and enterprise – all in search of a more perfect society. Notwithstanding the extreme differences between races, nations, and beliefs, people across the globe – six billion and counting – are all looking for a better life.

In a word, we are all looking for redemption.

For redemption means freedom – freedom from the boundaries that confine the human spirit. To be redeemed means to be freed from an overbearing employer or a tyrannical regime ... to be freed from a dangerous habit or an abusive situation ... to be freed from the fear within ourselves and the confusion that clouds our vision.

So we are all looking for redemption, whether we use that word or not. Some of us experience brief bursts of freedom, but more often than not, we resign ourselves to lives without such light or clarity. The chains of our existence seem too formidable. We are in a state of confinement, of exile; we have allowed the material world to lead us into darkness.

On a sweltering summer day, an old man went down into a cool cellar for some relief. The moment he entered, he was blinded by the darkness. “Don’t worry,” said another man in the cellar, “it is natural that when you go from the light to the darkness, you’re unable to see. But soon enough, your eyes will grow accustomed to it, and you will hardly notice that it is dark.”

“My dear friend,” replied the old man, turning to leave, “that is exactly what I am afraid of. Darkness is darkness; the danger is convincing yourself that it is light.”

8. Where Do We Stand Now?

After the thousands of years of living in the tunnel and traveling through its darkness, we now stand on the threshold of that final era. Revolutionary changes are taking place on all fronts – on a personal level and on a global level, in technology, in politics, and in the human spirit.

The values of freedom, tolerance, and generosity have spread throughout the community of nations. Family has become important again, as people seek to build meaningful relationships that have nothing to do with their careers or material desires. Throughout America and the world at large, people are genuinely searching for spiritual meaning, to find the very essence of their spirit. There is a greater commitment to

inner change and personal growth; instead of blaming others, people are beginning to realize that they must take responsibility for their own lives, and are endeavoring to do so.

So the world may be ready for redemption, but how do we prepare for it? By opening our eyes and understanding the unique time in which we live. By acknowledging that the events that unfold each day are part of the process leading toward a meaningful life and redemption. By learning about God and spirituality so that we may live according to His will.

This won't always be easy. As we wrestle with an uneasy past and an unknown future, it may seem more comforting to cling to the lives we know.

Because the challenge is so large, it's best to start small. Take an inspiring class or go to a lecture. Learn about God and the purpose of creation. Remember, the first step in escaping the darkness is acknowledging that it is darkness. Familiarize yourself with these ideas at your own pace, and you will begin to see a larger picture taking shape in your mind. Pause for a moment to reflect on the true priorities in your life. Make your home a loving environment; make your office a place where generosity and compassion replace selfishness and aggression. And above all, share these ideas with your family and friends.

If one person can resolve to make these changes, then ten can. And if ten can, so can one hundred, and on and on. After all, we are intrinsically good; we naturally want to lead better, more productive, more meaningful lives. Commit yourself today and exhort others to do the same.

After traveling for so long in the dark and winding tunnel of life, we are now approaching its end, and we are beginning to feel and see the warm, bright light. Now, then, is not the time to be skeptical or selfish. Even the smallest things – a kind word, a dollar to charity, a few minutes of prayer – are immeasurably significant. We must do anything we can to throw even one ray of light into the darkness.

[Our journey is about to end; we are set to reach our destination. May it happen speedily in our days, Amen.]

9. *Yizkor*: Embodying the Spirit

This is also one of the most powerful aspects of saying *Yizkor*. We don't just remember our loved ones; we commit to giving charity in their honor.

We do this as a way of bridging the spiritual with the material – to create a living memorial for the souls of our parents in this physical world.

Beyond that ... we don't want to merely tell our children that "grandpa was a good man," and "grandma was a special woman." We want to share with them actual, real-life stories of our parents and grandparents. Above all, we want to be living, shining examples of what it means to be a virtuous person in this world.

And finally, we are not satisfied with knowing that our parents are at peace in the world of spirit. We want them back here reunited with us, souls within bodies, which we can see and touch and speak to in a very tangible and concrete way.

We want Moshiach – a world in which matter and spirit will be fused as one. A world in which we all will be at our healthiest – living a seamless life, in which our material activities are all directed toward spiritual goals, when the "entire preoccupation of the world will be to know God," as Maimonides teaches us.

And he concludes his lesson by citing today's Haftarah: "A world filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea."

We have been promised that we are the threshold of this time. May we do our part to usher it in. Amen.

PART II: THE MOSHIACH'S BANQUET

10. *Seudas Moshiach*

[Now we can appreciate the power of Moshiach on this last day of Pesach, as we read in the Haftarah and as we celebrate the *Seudas Moshiach* later today. So now a word about this special banquet.]

On a Jewish holiday, the mitzvah is to eat two festive meals (one in the evening and one in the day; dinner and lunch), unlike Shabbat when we eat three meals, the third meal being *seudah shlishi* or *shalesh seudos* just before Shabbat ends.

That's how it was until the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, came along and instituted a third meal, at the conclusion of the last day of Pesach. He called this special, festive banquet *Seudas Moshiach*, the Moshiach's Banquet, and his intention was to call attention to the fact that on the last day of Pesach the radiance of the Moshiach's light shines openly.

The Baal Shem Tov's students and successors continued this tradition, with each respective Rebbe, generation after generation, celebrating it at the end of the last day of Pesach. Initially, this special meal was marked by eating matzah, but at the turn of the 20th century, the Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Chabad Rebbe, initiated a new custom that the four cups be drunk as well. As the years passed and the custom became better known, the people celebrating this meal also grew in number, so much so that it has become a mainstay in many homes and communities, attracting more and more adherents from year to year.

11. From the Abstract to the Tangible

What is the meaning behind this special meal? What significance does it have for us, and why did the Baal Shem Tov feel the need to introduce the concept?

The belief in the coming of the Moshiach was always a fundamental part of Jewish faith. Maimonides counts it as one of the Thirteen

Principles of Faith: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Moshiach. Even if he delays, I will wait every day for him to come."

Yet, though all believing Jews accept this principle intellectually, for many the concept remains an abstraction...

And that's where some would prefer to keep it...

A Jew comes home from synagogue and tells his wife: "They say the Moshiach is coming any day and will take us all to Israel."

The wife becomes hysterical. "Oh no! That would be terrible. It took years till we could finally move into this neighborhood and buy the house we wanted. Now we've spent a fortune fixing it up. I don't want the Moshiach to take us away."

"Okay, okay, don't worry," the husband says. "We survived Pharaoh, we survived Haman. With God's help, we'll survive the Moshiach too!"

As I said some of us would prefer to keep it as an abstraction...

By instituting the *Seudah Moshiach*, the Baal Shem Tov empowered us to turn belief into reality. For partaking of the Moshiach's Banquet reinforces and translates our awareness of the Moshiach into a real physical experience which leads us to integrate this concept into our very flesh and blood.

12. Chassidic Contribution

Indeed, this is the entire purpose of Chassidus, as envisioned by the Baal Shem Tov – to imbue us with the awareness of the Divine in every aspect of our lives, so that we can better transform our material world into an intimate home for God.

Chassidus thus seeks to make the Moshiach and the Final Redemption a palpable reality that we can relate to. And the *Seudas Moshiach* is a case in point.

The purpose of this meal is to integrate and internalize the divine reality of Moshiach in a very real and tangible way.

We are not just reading and meditating about Moshiach. We are not only reciting with our lips the Haftarah that describes the world of Moshiach. We are actually partaking in a very physical banquet, called *Seudas Moshiach*, which in the main is composed of matzah and four cups of wine.

The tasteless flatness of matzah symbolizes selfless humility, a desire to transcend oneself. Wine, by contrast, is flavorful and pleasurable, and thus symbolizes the assertiveness of our individual personalities. Combining matzah and wine teaches us that self-transcendence does not require that we erase our personal identities.

Quite the contrary: Self-transcendence must ultimately be integrated into our individuality. Even when dedicating our lives to a higher purpose (not just to self-interest), we retain our distinctive character and identity. Once we have sublimated our will to a higher purpose, we can proceed to a more complete level of service, in which our essential commitment permeates every aspect of our personality.

This is why at the *Seudas Moshiach*, we digest not only the selflessness as symbolized by the matzah, but also ourselves as symbolized by the wine, which permeates our senses, sensations and pleasures.

This reflects the ultimate transformation of Moshiach's times: We will not be sacrificing our individual feelings through ascetic behavior, but "all of our flesh" – in all its manifestations – will perceive and be permeated with the Divine.

13. The Mission of Our Generation

Over the years, the Lubavitcher Rebbe launched an unprecedented campaign to explain and spread the custom of eating *Seudas Moshiach* at the end of Pesach.

Year after year, from the beginning of his leadership (in 1950), the Rebbe would elaborate on the significance of this special meal, always emphasizing its vital importance in our lives – helping place things in perspective, by appreciating that the material world is only a surface stepping stone to the world of Moshiach. Year after year, the Rebbe

would partake in a public Moshiach's Banquet which would stretch for hours on end. The meal was filled with profound insights and stirring melodies – all focused on keeping the flame of faith burning that we will merit to see the Moshiach in our times, and that we must do everything in our power to expedite the process.

The Rebbe often emphasized that our generation has been charged with the responsibility of making the entire world aware of the Moshiach. He said that this mission is particularly relevant in our day, because through the hard work of all the generations past, we have reached the "tipping point," when all that is needed is one final push that will bring the revelation of the Moshiach.

The Moshiach is waiting: "Here he stands behind our wall, watching through the windows, peering through the crevices." The walls of exile are already crumbling, and now, in the immediate future, Moshiach will be revealed.

The Rebbe, sensitive to those that may see his words as controversial, added the following qualification: "Some argue that speaking openly about the coming of Moshiach may alienate some people. The very opposite is true. We are living in the time directly preceding the Messianic age. The world is changing and people are willing, even anxious, to hear about the Moshiach. It is thus our duty to reach out and involve as many people as possible in the preparations for his coming."

We stand now in the year 2012/5772. Based on the principle that we must always grow in our holy and spiritual activities, clearly this year's *Seudas Moshiach* has to surpass all those in years past.

As we celebrate, we ought to ask ourselves: How are we adding to our efforts in bringing the message of the Moshiach and the Final Redemption to the mainstream? What initiatives are we making to teach ourselves and all those we come in contact about the divine reality that is within everything, and waiting to be released?

We want Moshiach – a world in which matter and spirit will be fused as one. A world in which we all will be at our healthiest – living a seamless life, in which our material activities are all directed toward spiritual goals, when the “entire preoccupation of the world will be to know God,” as Maimonides teaches us.

And he concludes the lesson by citing today’s Haftarah: “A world filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”

We have been promised that we are the threshold of this time. May we do our part to usher it in. Amen.