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Acharon Shel Pesach/ 22 Nissan

Taxes or Moshiach: Which is More Real?

April 18, 2017

DEATH AND TAXES OR MOSHIACH: WHICH IS MORE REAL? MAKING OUR DREAMS COME TRUE

ABSTRACT

On this day two polar opposites converge: The last day of Pesach, which offers us Isaiah's vision of the beautiful world of redemption, and April 18, which this year is tax day in the USA, reminding us of Benjamin Franklin's famous idiom: in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.

What are you more certain of – death and taxes or the belief in the coming of Moshiach in the final redemption?

This last day of Pesach captures the ultimate Jewish message: The absolute belief that our dreams will come true. That we will indeed make the world a better place. That we will certainly see a world at peace and harmony, with nations living peacefully with one another, with famine and disease eradicated – a world with no more evil and destruction because it will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.

On this day we are compelled to ask: What is more real for us – death and taxes or a vision of a better tomorrow? What is truer to us – materialism or spirituality? Our struggle for survival or our dreams of transcendence? Displacement and dissonance or redemption and unity?

What is more realistic for Jews – the extraordinary or the ordinary, nature or miracles?

Humorous anecdotes, moving stories and the Baal Shem Tov's instituting Moshiach's Feast on this last day of Pesach, with fascinating details about the evolution of this custom through the generations – all come together and weave a tale that empowers us with tools to turn abstract faith into tangible reality; and infuses us with the absolute belief that our dreams can and will come true!

[This sermon includes plenty of interesting history and materials about Moshiach's Seudah, which can be shared at your Moshiach's seudah].

1. Nothing Is Certain, Except Death and Taxes

Today is *Achron Shel Pesach*, the last and final day of Passover.

Pesach is the story of freedom and redemption. Beginning with the exodus from Egypt, and culminating with the final redemption from all forms of displacement and dissonance – personal and global.

That is why we just read in today's Haftorah Isaiah's famous Messianic vision,¹ which beautifully describes the better world which we all hope and dream for – a world free of war, famine and destruction, a world filled with Divine knowledge as the water cover the sea.²

Today is also April 18, which this year is also tax day in the USA, the day when our taxes are due. What possible connection can there be between the two?!

The connection, my friends, is the study in contrast these two polar opposites offer us:

Everyone knows Benjamin Franklin's famous idiom: Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.³

This idiom is based on two earlier quotes: Things as certain as death and taxes, can be more firmly believed;⁴ and, 'Tis impossible to be sure of any thing but Death and Taxes.⁵

Sadly, for many people this is indeed true – the most certain thing in our lives is death and taxes.

Enter this year – this last day of Pesach which falls on April 18 – and it challenges our assumption about what is real and certain and what is not.

2. What is Real?

As we read Isaiah's vision of the redemption – the Geulah – and we internalize its message, it compels us to ask: which indeed is more realistic – our material reality of today, symbolized by our death and taxes, or our spiritual vision for tomorrow, of a better world?

I know that ostensibly many of us would answer the former. After all, money and survival – and all that is tangible – is the reality we are accustomed to, the one we deal and struggle with on a daily basis, the one that consumes the grinding wear and tear of our lives.

I know that many would say: Rabbi, please be realistic. Moshiach, redemption – these are all great ideas; eloquent concepts; beautiful dreams. But we live in the “real” world, where these ideas are nothing more than fantasy.

But we Jews were never “realistic,” we were always dreamers. Had we been realistic we would have disappeared long ago. Had we simply looked at the “hard facts” we would have capitulated to the Egyptians, the Persians,

¹ Isaiah 10-11.

² Isaiah 11:9 – Haftorah of Acharon shel Pesach.

³ In a 1789 letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy.

⁴ The Political History of the Devil, Daniel Defoe, 1726.

⁵ The Cobbler of Preston by Christopher Bullock, 1716.

the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Cossacks, the Nazis – and that’s only a small list of those that would see us gone.

Had we been realistic, our parents and grandparents would never have been able to come out of the Holocaust and rebuilt their lives, families and future.

Had Abraham, Moses, Mordechai – and the thousands that followed – succumbed to the naysayers (and there were plenty), we would not be sitting here today celebrating Pesach.

No, my dear friends, we were never “realistic” – realistic that is on the material world’s terms. For us dreams, hopes, visions – were reality. And they kept us going. For us the extraordinary is ordinary, and miracles are natural.

That is what this last day of Pesach reminds us.

But the challenge to hold on to this vision is great. Let us not underestimate how powerful are the tentacles of material existence, incessantly working on convincing us that there is nothing more certain than death and taxes.

Here are a few humorous examples.

3. Watching For Moshiach

In the middle of a forest is a small town. It was built far from the main roads and the Jews living there were afraid that when the Messiah comes, he would not know they were there and would pass them by. So they build a tower on the edge of town and appoint the town beggar as watchman. If the Messiah should come, the watchman would give him directions to the town.

One day a stranger visits the tower and as instructed, the watchman comes down to greet him.

“What are you doing here in the middle of nowhere?” asks the stranger.

“My job is to sit on top of this tower and wait for the Messiah,” answers the watchman.

“So how do you like your job?” the stranger asks, “it can’t pay you much.

“I know,” replies the watchman. “But at least it’s steady work.”

This perfectly captures how for many Messiah is an abstract belief that has little to do with our on the ground reality. After 2000 years of waiting, Messiah has become at best a distant dream; something we no longer expect to happen very soon. Anyone paid to watch out for him is guaranteed steady work...

Sure belief in Moshiach's coming is a fundamental tenet of Judaism, one of Maimonides' 13 principles of faith; but it remains an exercise in abstraction, nothing concrete.

What is Messiah?

4. Is Messiah Good for the Jews?

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

The wife becomes hysterical. "Oh no! It 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 Messiah to take us away."

"Okay, okay, don't worry," says the husband. "We survived Pharaoh, we survived the Babylonians, we survived Haman, we survived the Romans. With G-d's help, we'll survive the Messiah too!"

Death and taxes is our reality. Messiah is a thing to be wary of – something that will disrupt the "comfort zones" of our present lives. Life as we know it can seem quite good. We finally have a nice house, two cars, a great family, a good job; we have Pesach programs and great kosher restaurants; we have high-end wines from Israel and free trips to the Holy Land. Who needs Moshiach? Won't he disturb our nice equilibrium? Why rock the boat? Life is relatively good – do we really need Moshiach?

What is Messiah? Why should I believe in it? And how can it make my life more redemptive and liberating?

5. Peace Between Wolves and Calves?

And not to be outdone, the cynics weigh in on the famous verse in today's penultimate Messianic visionary Haftorah (mentioned earlier): And a wolf shall live with a lamb, and a leopard shall lie with a kid; and a calf and a lion cub and a fatling [shall lie] together, and a small child shall lead them.⁶

Woody Allen quips: I've always liked, someday the lamb will lay by the lion.... but the lamb won't get much sleep."

And then this:

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 calf in a cage together.

⁶ Isaiah 11:6.

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

“How do you do it?”

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

6. The Moshiach Feast

All these jokes demonstrate how it isn’t always easy to see Moshiach – and the peaceful world he will usher in – as real as we do death and taxes.

That’s why we have a Pesach, and last day of Pesach, to remind us – to wake us up to a higher reality that the one we see with our naked and myopic eyes.

But there’s more.

To help make Moshiach a tangible reality, the founder of the Chassidic revolution, the Baal Shem Tov, instituted a fascinating custom on this last day of Pesach: the Moshiach Seudah, a feast of Messianic portions and proportions.

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 Shabbos when we eat three meals, the third meal called “shalesh seudos” eaten late afternoon.

That is until the Baal Shem Tov came around, and instituted a third meal, at the conclusion of the last day of Pesach. He called this special, festive banquet “Moshiach’s seudah,” Moshiach’s festival meal. The reason for this is because on the last day of Pesach the radiance of Moshiach’s light shines openly.⁷

The Baal Shem Tov’s students and successors continued this tradition, with each respective Rebbe, generation after generation, celebrating “Moshiach’s seudah” at the end of the last day of Pesach.

Initially, this special meal was marked by eating matzah (and the basics of any holiday meal). In the year 5666 (1906) the Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Chabad Rebbe, initiated a new custom that the four cups be drunk as well at “Moshiach’s seudah.” That year the Rebbe Rashab ate the festive meal of Acharon Shel Pesach with the yeshiva students of Tomchei Tmimim. He then instructed that four cups of wine be given each student, and then declared, “this is Moshiach’s seudah.”

In earlier years this special “Moshiach’s banquet” was celebrated by a select few who were aware of it. But as the years passed and the custom became more known, the people celebrating this meal also grew in number.

⁷ Hayom Yom, 22 Nissan. For the discussion below see Sichos Acharon shel Pesach: 5704, 5716 (Likkutei Sichos Vol. 4, p. 1298). 5720, 5722 (Likkutei Sichos Vol. 7, pp. 272-278). 5732, 5748.

In the last generation, with the Lubavitcher Rebbe widely publicizing this tradition and encouraging Jews worldwide, regardless of background, to celebrate it, “Moshiach’s seudah” has become a mainstay in many homes and communities, attracting more and more adherents from year to year.

7. Why a Messianic Feast?

The question begs however: What is the meaning behind this special meal, which carries such an unusual name: “Moshiach’s seudah”? What significance does it have for us, and why did the Baal Shem Tov, of all people, introduce the concept?

In truth, the question can be posed the other way around: What exactly did the Baal Shem Tov innovate with this tradition?

The connection between this month of Nissan – and Passover in general – to the final redemption was well known long before the Baal Shem Tov. As our sages teach, “In Nissan we were redeemed and in Nissan we will be redeemed.”⁸ Indeed, a key element in Passover is that it is the prelude to the final redemption through Moshiach, as it says “just as in the days of your exodus from Egypt, I will show you wonders” in the future.⁹

Specifically the Eighth Day of Pesach is associated with our hopes for the coming of Moshiach, as explicitly emphasized in today’s Haftarah, which openly describes many prophecies about Moshiach and the final redemption, as mentioned earlier.

So what exactly did the Baal Shem Tov contribute with instituting “Moshiach’s meal” on the last day of Pesach?

8. Make the Uncertain Certain; Make the Abstract Tangible

Even before the Baal Shem Tov, the month of Nissan in general and the last day of Passover in particular was surely the most auspicious time for the coming of Moshiach. And the reciting of the Haftarah is in order to hasten and draw down Moshiach in our times.

But as long as Moshiach didn’t come, this day of the year remains a potential time for the coming of Moshiach. It still retains a unique opportunity for redemption, which makes it stand out from all other days of the year, but it is only Moshiach in a potential state, not an actual one.

⁸ Rosh Hashana 11a. Shemos Rabba 15:11.

⁹ Micha 7:15.

With “Moshiach’s seudah” the Baal Shem Tov introduced a new element – that on the last day of Passover we have an actual, tangible revelation of Moshiach, not just a potential one. And a revelation that manifests in a very real and tangible way – an actual, physical meal called “Moshiach’s feast.”

Another way of putting it: The belief in Moshiach was always a fundamental part of Jewish faith. The Rambam counts it as one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith: “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of 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 of Moshiach remains an abstraction. With instituting “Moshiach’s meal,” the Baal Shem Tov empowered us to turn the belief into reality: Partaking of “Moshiach’s seudah” reinforces and translates our awareness of Moshiach into a meal, a physical experience which leads us to associate and integrate this concept into our very flesh and blood.

In other words, Moshiach’s meal allows us to experience this greater vision as a reality that counters our materialistic “death and taxes” reality.

9. What Is Moshiach?

To understand Moshiach, we first must understand reality.

To most of us reality is what we see and hear and experience with our five senses. Reality is our tangible “death and taxes” world and our physical life – the one in which we go to work each day, are faced with various pressures and challenges, financial, health, family, social and all the other activities that constitute our daily routines. The spiritual, the sublime, the transcendental – is at best an aspiration and a dream, and at worst, an unrealistic fantasy and escape, unreachable as it is impractical.

Moshiach and Redemption tell us a very different story. Reality is the Divine and the sublime that is concealed from our myopic view. Indeed, G-d created the universe in a manner in which we perceive our own existence as the intrinsic reality, and G-dliness as something novel and acquired.

G-d 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. We see G-d’s existence as something outside ourselves, as a superimposed reality, whereas in truth, it is G-d who is real, while our existence is “on the outside.”

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

This is the meaning of Moshiach and Redemption: The world as it was always meant to be. The world living up to its true purpose. Not one in which the Divine is concealed under layer upon layers of material shrouds; but one in which the soul of everything inexistence radiates outward, and we see the reality for what it is: The

material world as a container and package protecting the Divine light within.

As the prophet describes:¹⁰ “And the glory of G-d will be revealed and all flesh will see it together.” At that time, “the glory of G-d” will permeate even the physical aspects of the world — “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.

Instead of perceiving death and taxes as certainties, Moshiach teaches us to perceive G-dliness as certainty, and it is death and taxes whose existence is an aberration, highly uncertain, and ultimately rendered useless.

This explains the famous words Moshiach told the Baal Shem Tov: In reply to the Baal Shem Tov’s question “when are you coming?” – Moshiach answered: “When the wellsprings of your teachings spread outward.”¹¹

The wellspring of Chassidus (the Baal Shem Tov’s teachings) educate us how to make the Divine tangible and concrete; how to relate to Moshiach and the Redemption as a very palpable reality. How to integrate the Divine into our daily, mundane lives, and thus prepare us for the times of Moshiach, when the “world will be filled Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”

It’s one thing to believe abstractly in these ideas; it’s quite another to perceive them as a true reality – as real and tangible as touching your own hand.

10. Why a Meal? Why a Feast?

We now can understand why the Baal Shem Tov was the one who revealed and instituted “Moshiach’s meal.”

The purpose of this meal – which in microcosm captures the entire purpose of Chassidus – is to integrate and internalize the Divine reality of Moshiach in a very real and tangible way. At a feast, we digest and internalize, bridging the outer with the inner.

We are not just reading and meditating about Moshiach. We are not only reciting with our lips the Haftorah that describes the world of Moshiach. We are actually partaking in a very physical banquet, called “Moshiach’s meal.” By doing so, we are actually digesting food and drink of “Moshiach’s meal” – that becomes our flesh and blood, thus helping train and prepare us for the full Divine revelation with the coming of Moshiach in the final redemption, when “the glory of G-d” will permeate “all flesh.”

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:5

¹¹ Letter of Baal Shem Tov to his brother-in-law Rabbi Gershon of Kitov – first published in 1781 as an appendix to Ben Porat Yosef by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, one of the Baal Shem Tov’s chief disciples. Later published at the beginning of Keser Shem Tov, and other places.

As mentioned earlier, in 1906 (the same year of the great classic series of Chassidic discourses called *hemshech samach vav*) the Rebbe Rashab added a new feature to “Moshiach’s seudah” – the drinking of four cups of wine.

During the time of the Baal Shem Tov, the main ingredient of “Moshiach’s seudah” was matzah. 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 in “Moshiach’s seudah” 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 your life to the Divine (not just to self-interest), you retain your distinctive character and identity. Once a person has sublimated his will to a higher purpose, he can proceed to a more complete level of service, in which his essential commitment permeates every aspect of his personality.

This innovation of the Rebbe Rashab exemplifies the comprehensive contribution of Chabad Chassidus to the legacy of the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov taught us how to reveal our essential G-dly nature and thus rise above our personal identities. Chabad, an acronym for the Hebrew words Chochmah, Binah and Daas (wisdom, understanding and knowledge), brings the Baal Shem Tov’s teachings into the realm of the intellect, allowing them to be integrated and applied within each individual’s personal framework.

Thus, with the introduction of the four cups of wine to “Moshiach seudah,” the Rebbe Rashab deepened the impact of this meal on our Moshiach consciousness. We digest not only the selflessness (matzah) of Moshiach’s meal, but also the four cups of wine, which permeates our individuality – 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 flesh” – in all its manifestations – will perceive and be permeated with the Divine.

11. Our Job Today: To Bring Redemption Now!

Two generations after the Rebbe Rashab, the Rebbe of our generation, the seventh Chabad Rebbe, launched an unprecedented campaign to explain and spread the custom of eating “Moshiach’s seudah” 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 wash and partake in a public “Moshiach’s seudah,” with a powerful farbrengen that would stretch for hours on end, filled with profound insights and stirring melodies – all focused on keeping the flame of faith burning that we will merit to see Moshiach in our times, and we therefore must do everything in our power to expedite the process.

During “Moshiach’s seudah” in 1972 – and other years – the Rebbe emphasized that our generation has been charged with the responsibility of making the entire world aware of Moshiach, and this includes the custom of conducting “Moshiach’s seudah.” He said then, 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 Moshiach. As the Previous Rebbe expressed it, “We have already polished the buttons.”¹² Moshiach is waiting: “Here he stands behind our wall, watching through the windows, peering through the crevices.”¹³ 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 Moshiach. It is thus our duty to reach out and involve as many people as possible in the preparations for his coming.”

12. Yizkor

Our discussion about making G-dliness and Moshiach a reality in our lives sheds new light and help us appreciate the immortal Yizkor service we recite today:

For us Jews the soul is reality and the body is superimposed. When we recite Yizkor we are not simply remembering the souls of our parents that once lived in the past. We are connecting with their souls as they continue their journey in the present, here and now!

In a world where death and taxes are the only certainty, those that have passed on have done just that – passed on, and are no longer with us.

But on this day when we connect with the eternal vision of a soulful Messianic world, when we are certain that the world will realize its purpose and we are part of making that happen – then death and taxes are the farthest things from our minds. Then the souls of our parents and loved ones are here with us, praying with us, hoping with us, beseeching G-d to finally bring the Geulah, the redemption, when we will all be reunited, soul in body, with our dearest.

¹² Sichas Simchas Torah, 5689.

¹³ HaSichos 5699, p. 316.

13. Conclusion

On this last day of Pesach, let us all step back from the so-called realities and certainties of our lives. Let us pause and think. Let us ask ourselves: What is truly the thing you are most certain of? Is it indeed death and taxes? Is it our impermanent material concerns? Is it our fleeting desires and temptations?

Or is it the vision of a better world? The dream of inner and outer peace? The belief that goodness will prevail? That our love is stronger than our hate?

The faith in the coming of Moshiach and the ushering in, finally, of a world redeemed from greed and duplicity, a world in which nations, communities and families work side by side in cooperation and harmony – a world filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.

May we experience redemption now, and may we feast esoterically in a tangible way and tangibly in an esoteric way.

And may we carry this clarity all year round. Amen!

Gut Yom Tov!

Happy Passover!