

## A PROPOSED DISTINCTION BETWEEN EXPECTATIONAL AND ASPIRATIONAL MESSIANISM

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One obstacle, I suggest, to the development of Jewish political philosophizing has been the perception that ‘the answer’ is already contained in “The Messianic Idea” – which “idea” is presumed to be a single concept, as described in, *e.g.*, Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*,<sup>1</sup> and Gershom Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of The Messianic Idea in Judaism.”<sup>2</sup>

I propose here, however, that “The Messianic Idea,” as it has come down to us, and as it might be re-explored going forward, can better be analyzed as a blend of responses to *two distinct* questions – *i.e.*: what do we imagine might be the constitution of our ideal Jewish state; and, how might we get, from where we are today, to that ideal?

When we disentangle these two questions, we may see that, for various historical reasons, what we take to be a single established ‘Tradition’ has, by having focused on just the *second* question, failed, at a minimum for several centuries, to ‘update’ its answer(s) to the *first* question.

If this diagnosis is correct, then perhaps there is room for a renewal of Jewish political philosophizing, *within* a ‘traditional’ framework, by separately articulating and then seeking to answer the *first* question.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Third Hebrew Edition by W. F. Stinespring (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1955). (Klausner published the original in three parts, in 1909, 1921, and 1923.)

<sup>2</sup> In Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays in Jewish Spirituality* (NY: Schocken, 1971); first published 1959, translated by Michael A. Meyer.

This paper proposes, as a first step towards such a program of renewed inquiry, to discuss how and why the late great American political/moral philosopher John Rawls, as a fundamental point in his work, distinguished between the questions of “ideal” and “non-ideal” (or transitional) theory.<sup>3</sup> This paper then suggests that various historical and theoretical disputes in the existing literature concerning Jewish messianism can usefully be illuminated by distinguishing between (what I will call) ‘aspirational messianism’ and ‘expectational messianism.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1971), pp. 8-9 and 245-246. Rawls, who died in 2002, was awarded a National Humanities Medal in 1999, in recognition of how his teaching “helped a whole generation of learned Americans revive their faith in democracy itself.” Online summaries of his work are available at *Wikipedia*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online) and *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>4</sup> I presented the substance of this paper—without, however, the foregoing introduction—at the 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies, August 9, 2017, Hebrew University (Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem). Subsequently, I had the opportunity to read Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (NY: Oxford U.P., 2017). Novenson usefully reviews the history of the scholarly discussion concerning “The Messianic Idea” as a single concept, and proposes that we need to substitute a theoretical framework that allows us to see how the term “Messiah” has functioned in different ways, in different contexts—in accordance with Wittgenstein’s philosophical proposal as to how concepts depend for their meaning on how they are used in different “language games.” I agree with Novenson in rejecting the usefulness of a singular “The Messianic Idea.” My focus here is somewhat different, however, in two respects. First, I am not concerned just with texts using the specific term ‘Messiah,’ but more broadly with discussions of (what I am calling) ‘aspirational messianism’ and ‘expectational messianism,’ whether or not the texts under consideration specifically employ the term “messiah.” what counts for me is whether the text at issue is responding to the ideal and/or non-ideal (transitional) *questions*. And second (and more importantly): while Novenson’s main concern is simply to show that there is non-uniformity, my concern is to try to *re-organize* at least some of the data that Novenson has left fragmented. While I do not wish to suggest that the *only* questions that our texts

## Rawls's Distinction

John Rawls argued that our political philosophers should focus on two distinct questions.<sup>5</sup> First, Rawls identified what he called the question of “ideal theory,” which asks: what principles should apply in respect of the fundamental institutions of hypothetical societies, in order to maintain justice within each society and peace amongst the world’s peoples, on the assumption that, once those principles are articulated, people will generally comply with them? Second, Rawls identifies the problem of “non-ideal theory” – a question known to economists as the problem of the second-best<sup>6</sup>: *viz.*, what should we do to pursue justice and peace in our actual “non-ideal” worlds?

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seek to answer are the questions of ideal and non-ideal (transitional) theory, I do contend that recognizing these two fundamental and distinct questions *can* usefully organize *some* past discussions and help clear a path going forward.

For example, both Novenson (at pp. 148-160) and I (*infra*) use as an example the scholarly debate as to whether the Mishnah should be considered ‘messianic.’ Novenson concludes (at p. 157) by simply *rejecting* Neusner’s position – that the Mishnah is not ‘Messianic’ – as resting on a too “narrow definition of messianism.” I want to say, rather, that Neusner and his opponents *both* have merit, but are answering different questions – and I propose that these different answers and questions correspond to the questions of ideal and non-ideal/transitional theory, respectively.

In short, I accept – and recommend – Novenson’s efforts to ‘clear the ground’, but hope that, once that work is done, I am moving the analysis forward.

<sup>5</sup> See *supra*, fn. 3. For secondary literature addressing Rawls’ distinction, see generally, *e.g.*, A. John Simmons, “Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38:1 (2010), pp. 5-36; and David Estlund, “Utopophobia,” *Phil. & Pub. Affairs* 42:2 (2014), pp. 113-134.

<sup>6</sup> To take a contemporary example: in an ideal world, if there is a recession, the government should increase its level of demand for public works such as infrastructure improvement, and monetary policy should be utilized solely in a coordinating role. Since, however, our legislature in the U.S. has been incapacitated, the Federal Reserve has been forced to step up, to use monetary policy to try to incentivize

Rawls argued that ideal theory can help us—even in our non-ideal world—to identify and to resist political programs that advocate and pursue “the gravest forms of political injustice”<sup>7</sup>—and he cites, as an illustration in this regard, the failure of clergy in Germany, in 1933, to protest the first Nazi proclamation of an economic boycott of the Jews.<sup>8</sup>

More positively, history suggests that simply articulating an aspiration can affect how we subsequently think and act. For example, if there had been a Miss Universe pageant in 1794, none of the contestants would have wished for “world peace” (as satirized in, e.g., the 2000 film *Ms. Congeniality*). The general understanding at the time—until the lessons of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776, had sunk in—was that a nation, to be wealthy and successful, needed to conquer and/or to colonize other peoples; and so a world with many nations was necessarily a world at war. In 1795, however, Kant published his pamphlet *On Perpetual Peace*<sup>9</sup>—and he is generally given credit for thereby single-handedly placing the idea of peace amongst nations on the agenda of what might be hoped-for and sought-after.<sup>10</sup>

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businesses to make the necessary investments to lift us out of the recession, by offering low interest rates. Such a monetary policy, however, by its nature, is of only limited assistance—the economist’s slogan in this regard is that one cannot ‘push on a string.’ But in our non-ideal world, it is necessary for the Fed to try.

<sup>7</sup> John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1999), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22 fn. 16.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Michael Shermer, “Perpetual Peace: Are Democracies Less Warlike?” *Scientific American*, Oct. 14, 2014, reporting new research on Kant’s hypothesis (available on-line).

<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in the American colonies as of December 1775, the idea of independence was spoken-of only by philosophers—and only as a matter of theory—in discussions laced with Latin quotations. A single plain-English pamphlet by a single person in January 1776, viz., Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*, changed that and, virtually overnight, gave the general population of the Colonies a vocabulary and framework for debating and advocating independence. See the editor’s introduction in Edward Larkin (ed.), *Common Sense [by] Thomas Paine* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004).

Lastly, for present purposes, Rawls also argued, however, that our theorizing about the ideal should be subject to a specific constraint—which he called the constraint of a “realistic utopia:” we may speculate as to how our institutions might be changed, but we should assume that human nature does *not* change. Rawls quotes in this regard a formulation of this test by Rousseau: *i.e.*, that we should imagine an ideal world by “taking men as they are”—*i.e.*, given human nature as it is; and yet “laws as they might be”—*i.e.*, hypothesizing an appropriate framework of reasonable and just political and social institutions.<sup>11</sup>

### A Conceptual Distinction In Approaching Messianism

Rousseau’s formulation sounds strikingly like Maimonides’ insistence, drawing upon one Talmudic dictum, that the Messianic Era will not see any change in human nature or in the natural order generally but, rather, only that Israel will be free from political oppression.<sup>12</sup>

We might also recall that other statements in the Babylonian Talmud attributed to various *tanna'im* (*i.e.*, Sages of the period of the Mishnah) state the belief that the Messianic Age will last for as little as

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<sup>11</sup> Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> See Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 99a. Sh’ mu’el is quoted as teaching “*ein bein ha’olam hazeh limot hamashiach ela shi’bood malchuyot bilvad*” (אין בין העולם הזה לימות המשיח אלא שעבוד מלכויות בלבד), “There is no difference between this world and the Messianic Era except for Jewish independence from the dominion of foreign kingdoms”) (translation from *Artscroll Schottenstein* edition of the Talmud) (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1995). See *Commentary to Perek Helek*, translated in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (NY: Behrman House 1972) at pp. 414-415. We bypass here the question of the relationship amongst Maimonides’ views as stated in his *Mishneh Torah*, in his commentary on the Mishnah, *Perek Helek* (*i.e.*, Sanhedrin, ch. 10), and in his *Epistle to Yemen*. For one view, see David Hartman in *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, Abraham Halkin (trans.) and David Hartman (discussions) (New York: JPS, 1983).

only 40 or 70 years, or three generations.<sup>13</sup> We might understand this as teaching that the Messianic Era is primarily of symbolic importance—in showing what can be achieved even within the natural order, before the final rewards of the World to Come.

Accordingly, we can—and I suggest we should—isolate, in respect to Jewish Messianism, the two following distinct questions—notwithstanding that, historically, these two questions have generally been combined and conflated.

First, we might ask, *what* are the institutions that would or should control in the Messianic Era, and *why* do we think that such institutions are indeed ideal? I will call this the question of ‘aspirational messianism.’<sup>14</sup>

Second, we might ask, *how* do we imagine getting from our present non-ideal world to a world characterized by those ideals—or at a minimum, how do we imagine acting to move this world closer to the ideal justice and peace of that Messianic Era? I will call this the question of ‘expectational messianism.’

I suggest that once we have thus separated-out these two distinct questions, we can see that a variety of questions and/or disputes within the existing literature concerning Jewish Messianism, and a variety of other distinctions proposed by, *e.g.*, Scholem and others, can be clarified and re-aligned by reference to our two questions.

## Examples of Historical Questions

Once we set aside the assumption that Jewish messianism can *only* mean a messianism calling for a Davidic king, we might ask: *has* our tradition ever expressed a hope that the institutions of the

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<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Eliezer argues for 40 years; Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah for 70 years; and Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi for 3 generations (each citing Biblical prooftexts). Babylonian Talmud, *ad locum*. The last view is also adopted in *Sifre* to Deut. 32:7, and *Mekhilta d’R. Yishmael*, end of *Amalek* II.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow the term ‘aspiration’ from the legal philosopher Lon Fuller, who distinguished between a “morality of duty” and a “morality of aspiration,” in *The Morality of Law* (New Haven: Yale U.P.; rev. ed. 1969), *e.g.*, p. 5.

Messianic Era would be other than a kingdom ruled by a descendant of David?

And indeed recent scholarship concerning the prophet known as Second Isaiah (dating to around 540-520 BCE) has understood that prophet to have advocated for what we might call an idealized democracy. Thus, Second Isaiah declared, in Isaiah 55:3-5 (familiar as the culmination of the Third Haftarah of Consolation) that God was replacing the Davidic Covenant with a new covenant being made with the *entire* people. (This is, to be sure, not the traditional reading of these verses, but it is now the accepted reading.)<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, we might then ask: *when*, as a matter of the historical record, *did* the 'main-line tradition' commit itself to the ideal of a messianic kingdom ruled by descendants of David? Kenneth Pomykala has argued that the Davidic messianic ideal was a *late* development, as seen in, *e.g.*, the apocryphal Psalms of Solomon ch. 17

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<sup>15</sup> See, *e.g.*, most recently, Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40-66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2012), pp. 434-435. The first half of the line at issue is straightforward: *vi'echrita lachem b'rit olam* (ואכרתה לכם ברית עולם). This translates as "And I will make with you [plural—referring to the entire people of Israel] an everlasting covenant." The second half of the line, however, is less clear: *chasdei David han'emanim* (חסדי דוד הנאמנים). The problem facing translators is that there seems to be a word or thought that is unexpressed, as to how this second line connects to the first line. The old Jewish Publication Society translation (from 1917) reads "Even the sure mercies of David." This translation thus sought to suggest, via the 'linking' word "even," that the anticipated future covenant with the entire people was just an extension of the covenant with David, promised to David in II Samuel 7:8-16; see, *e.g.*, the *Soncino* commentary (Rev. Dr. I.W. Slotki, 1949) *ad locum*. The NJPS (1978) translates this second line *without*, however, any connecting word: "The enduring loyalty promised to David." Shalom Paul explains that the point of the second line, in context, is to teach that (at p. 438): "This same steadfast loyalty is... now conferred on the nation as a whole." See also verses 4-5, where the old JPS translated the repeated introductory *hen* (הן) in both places, as "Behold"; but Paul (at p. 439) explains that *hen* changes meaning, as a structuring contrast: "Just as [*hen*] David was commander of nations, so too [*hen*] shall you, *i.e.*, the nation in its entirety, be appointed over nations."

(written around 50 B.C.E.); and was motivated by an opposition to the Hasmonean rule of that time:

[T]he davidic dynasty tradition did not generate disappointment with the Hasmoneans; rather disappointment with the Hasmoneans generated this appropriation of the davidic dynasty tradition.<sup>16</sup>

We might then ask, *why* was it that, *e.g.*, Maimonides and Nahmanides concentrated their efforts not on reimagining the institutions of the Messianic Era, but rather, perhaps surprisingly, on stressing the expectation that the Talmud's Davidic vision was soon to be realized, in just another few years? Perhaps one can see, in, *e.g.*, Nahmanides' account of his Disputation at Barcelona (1263),<sup>17</sup> and in Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen*,<sup>18</sup> that the expectational aspect was given emphasis as one way to answer the contemporaneous challenges of Islam and Christianity – by affirming that the date of the triumph of Judaism over the other nations/religions (leaving aside the specific form) is clearly predicted for some date in the not-too-distant future. Arguably, this tactic worked as a short-term answer to the challenges then facing the Jewish communities in Yemen and Spain. So, notwithstanding the adverse psychological side-effects produced when those predictions repeatedly failed, this expectational model became “locked-in” within Jewish thought.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Pomykala, *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism: Its History and Significance for Messianism* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press/SBL; 1995), at p. 167. See also Eyal Regev, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archeology, Identity* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 147-150 and 163-165, endorsing Pomykala's analysis, and explaining how the concept of a Davidic messiah was expressed first in certain Qumran texts, and later in the *Psalms of Solomon*, as a basis for the opposition, by the authors thereof, to the Hasmonean rule.

<sup>17</sup> See Nina Caputo, *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community and Messianism* (Notre Dame, IN; University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> See *supra*, fn. 12.

<sup>19</sup> One might ask: would a 'democratic' covenant, as envisioned by Second Isaiah, fall within the category of messianism? Doesn't messianism require, as a matter of definition, a singular messiah? I

Addressing another context where our proposed distinction might be helpful: there has been a debate as to whether the Mishnah should be viewed as Messianic.<sup>20</sup> Jacob Neusner argued that the Mishnah sought to *replace* the apocalyptic yearnings that had led to the disastrous rebellions of 70 C.E. and 135 C.E. with a pragmatic and complete program for realizing “sanctification” even within the straightened conditions of 200 C.E..<sup>21</sup> Neusner’s position rested on his assumption that the Mishnah had ample opportunity to set forth whatever mattered to it as a self-contained document; and since it omits any mention of the Messiah, except in two back-handed passages (*i.e.*, B’rakhot 1:5 and Sotah 9:15), we must infer that the Messianic hope was not important to it.<sup>22</sup>

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would suggest, in response, that if we start by defining messianism as requiring a singular messiah, then, how do we begin to address messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which different visions of an end-time that were preserved in those texts suggested, variously, that the nation would be led by a Messianic King, *and* a Messianic Priest, *and* a Messianic Prophet/Teacher? See John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2d ed. 2010), esp. pp. 16-20, discussing the “terminological issue.”

I would suggest that this ‘multiplication’ of Messianic figures resulted from those authors’ attempts to address the question of ‘ideal theory’, and so to assert that, of course, an ideal Jewish state will require, *inter alia*, not only a just administrative state, but also an inspired teacher to translate the words of the Torah into end-time practice.

Conversely, it is generally accepted that apparently singular terms, like *avdi* (עבדִי, “my servant”), in the so-called ‘suffering servant’ vision of Second Isaiah, *i.e.*, Isaiah 52:13-53:12, can refer to an “idealized and righteous Israel,” as a “collective entity.” (See, *e.g.*, Paul, p. 18.) Accordingly my suggestion is that we should focus on the generative *questions*, and not rule-out, in advance, any particular answers.

<sup>20</sup> See also fn. 4, citing to and commenting on the discussion of this debate in Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism*.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Messiah In Context: Israel’s History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), and his chapter in Neusner, Green and Frerichs (eds.), *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U.P., 1987).

<sup>22</sup> For an argument that the Mishnah itself shows that it was fully aware of, but deliberately omitted, debates about the theoretical bases and

In contrast to Neusner, David Kraemer, in a review chapter on the Mishnah, argues that “the Mishnah represents the early rabbinic vision of a restored, Torah-perfected ‘messianic’ world” — *qualifying* however, that he is “us[ing] the term ‘messianic’ loosely.”<sup>23</sup> I think that what Kraemer is trying to say, in terms of the distinction proposed here, is that the Mishnah is highly aspirational. I would point not only, as he does, to how the Mishnah imagines institutions that did not then exist—in particular, King, Priesthood, and Sanhedrin—but also to how the interpersonal rules of the Mishnah assume, in effect, that all Jews will relate to each other with the high degree of respect and responsibility of *chaverim* (חברים, students in the Rabbinic disciple-circles), and so will be guided by the approval or disapproval of the Sages even when the Sages require *more* than “the law.” The Mishnah aspires to a society in which *chaverim kol Yisrael* (חברים כל ישראל): all Israel relate to each other as *chaverim*.

As a last example of discussions that might be clarified by our proposed distinction: turning to modern Zionist thinking, this distinction helps us to see why Joseph Klausner, as a Revisionist Zionist, argued that we should today fill-in gaps in Jewish political thought with values drawn from an analysis of Messianism, as being in effect the most authentic statement of an ideal Jewish politics—rather than filling-in such gaps with values drawn from Marx or Tolstoy.<sup>24</sup>

In Rawlsian terms, Klausner was in effect making the *assumption* that Jewish messianic speculation, as it had developed until that time, in fact represented Judaism’s best “ideal-theorizing” as to a “realistic utopia.” If that assumption were well-founded, then it would, per Rawls, be appropriate to look to such statements of ideal

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purposes of its rules, in order to foster a pragmatic consensus on what actions needed to be taken, see, *e.g.*, Richard Claman, “Mishnah as the Model for a New Overlapping Consensus,” *Conservative Judaism* vol. 63, no. 2 (Winter 2012) pp. 49-77, esp. pp. 51-57.

<sup>23</sup> In Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 4, The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (NY: Cambridge U.P.; 2006), p. 313, fn. 12.

<sup>24</sup> See, *e.g.*, David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counterhistory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P.; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1982), pp. 99-111, noting *inter alia*, Scholem’s debate with Joseph Klausner as to the proper connection, if any, between Zionism and messianism. See also *supra*, fn. 1.

theory as a guide. But as a matter of history, Klausner's assumption was incorrect: With the possible exception of Abrahavanel,<sup>25</sup> the political theory underlying our messianic speculation had not been updated since the time of the opposition to the Hasmonean dynasty in the Psalms of Solomon.

In contrast to Klausner, the concept of a realistic utopia helps us, I suggest, to understand Theodor Herzl's curious novel *Altneuland*.<sup>26</sup> As Shlomo Avineri has recently discussed,<sup>27</sup> *Altneuland* is an odd sort of work. It is *not* a classic utopian novel,<sup>28</sup> nor does *Altneuland* do well as a prediction of the future. To the contrary, *Altneuland* is wrong on just about every count. Written in 1902, its vision of a Jewish homeland in Israel in 1923 failed to anticipate, *e.g.*, the First World War, the development of kibbutzim, or the use of Hebrew as a national language. Also, *Altneuland's* hope for the new Jewish society that would be entirely non-militaristic has tragically not been fulfilled.<sup>29</sup>

What stands out, I suggest, however, in *Altneuland*, once one is thinking in Rawlsian terms, is Herzl's focus on institutions—*i.e.*, on how society can be optimally organized to provide appropriate incentives for individuals, while also fostering the harmonious growth of the community. For Herzl, the key to his hypothesized New Society was in its *balance* of producer cooperatives and supplier

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<sup>25</sup> See Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent and Dialogue* (Albany: State University of N.Y. Press; 2001), ch. 6.

<sup>26</sup> See Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland*, first published 1902; trans. Lotta Levensohn, with new introduction by Jacques Kornberg (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publ.; 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *Herzl's Vision: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State*, H. Watzman, trans. (Katonah, NY: Blue Bridge; 2014), ch. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Among other things: its central event (leaving aside the background personal stories, including the love story) is a *contested* political election campaign. Also, the inhabitants of the new land include members of the old 'Vienna' society whose attitudes Herzl rejected when they lived in Vienna, and whose behavior is not improved by their relocation to Israel.

<sup>29</sup> See also Dimitry Shumsky, "'This Ship Is Zion!'" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104:3 (Summer 2014), pp. 471-493, noting (at pp. 483-489) how Herzl's hope for a reformed Turkish system, allowing for semi-autonomous areas within its empire, failed to materialize.

cooperatives—anticipating, in effect, John Kenneth Galbraith’s 1952 economic theory of “countervailing power.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Theoretical Clarification**

Turning next to questions of theoretical classification, I suggest that distinguishing between ‘aspirational messianism’ and ‘expectational messianism’ may help clarify Gershom Scholem’s classic analysis.<sup>31</sup>

Scholem asserted that, in the history of Jewish messianic thought, two different, albeit somewhat overlapping, fundamental contrasts could be identified.

As a first pair of concepts, Scholem described what he called the “restorative” and the “utopian” forces or tendencies,<sup>32</sup> with the one looking backward to a Davidic monarch, and the other looking forward to something different—although, Scholem asserted, there is always at least a little of the utopian mixed into any otherwise-purely restorative vision, and vice-versa, resulting, in his words, in “the dialectically linked tension between the utopian and restorative factors.”<sup>33</sup>

Scholem also spoke, however, of a *second* pair of concepts. He thus talked about “[t]he two aspects of the Messianic idea which ap-

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<sup>30</sup> Herzl, speaking mostly through the novel’s hero, David Littwak, explains that there are scattered historical precedents—including the “Jubilee” system of land ownership—for such cooperatives; and the key to the success of the New Society will be how, starting from scratch, it will utilize the best available socio-economic institutional structures, to allow the Land to add millions of new inhabitants. (See, e.g., Littwak’s election speech at Neudorf, and several pages earlier, the explanation proffered by Herzl’s fictional Arab character, Raschid Bey, of the ground-lease system of ownership; pp. 120-124 and 142-154.)

<sup>31</sup> See Gershom Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” *supra*, fn. 2, esp. pp. 19-21.

<sup>32</sup> *E.g., ibid.* pp. 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also, e.g., at p. 21, where Scholem discussed “[t]he opposition between restorative and purely utopian, radical elements in the conception of the Messianic Torah.”

pear in rabbinic Judaism and provide it with ongoing apocalyptic inspiration, the catastrophic and the utopian.”<sup>34</sup>

Concerning this idea of “catastrophic,” Scholem had earlier written:

Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature—this cannot be sufficiently emphasized—a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic emphasis in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, at the end of his essay, Scholem held out the possibility that contemporary Zionism, with its “readiness for irrevocable action in the concrete realm, when it set on the utopian return to Zion,” might constitute a new type of Messianism.<sup>36</sup>

These two different *pairs* of concepts (that is, restorative vs. utopian, and catastrophic vs. utopian) are sometimes, in Scholem’s discussion, blended together: thus in his discussion of Maimonides, Scholem noted “[t]he rival tendencies of apocalyptic and rationalistic Messianism,” and how Maimonides chose “to forego” discussion of “the catastrophic character of the redemption.”<sup>37</sup>

My suggestion is that these different pairings respond to two different questions.

If one asks, “What should the government in the Messianic Age look like?” – then the responses within the tradition might be anything from an ideal Davidic monarch, to an administrator (*nasi*, נַסִּי) acting under an ideal theocracy,<sup>38</sup> to some form of democracy; and, in any of these regimes, the existing *halakha* (הֲלָכָה, “law”) might remain unchanged, or it might be modified to correspond to those ideal political institutions.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ezekiel 46:16-18.

<sup>39</sup> See Scholem’s comment regarding “the antinomian potentialities which are latent in Messianic utopianism,” concluding with his famous metaphor:

If one asks (our second question), “Can we get from here to there?” – the responses within the tradition might be anything from “never,” because Messianism is inherently catastrophic; to, “maybe,” because action in the concrete realm *might* be possible, moving us towards one or another of the ideals identified in response to the first question. Perhaps more importantly, however, we might re-phrase this second question as “Can we act today so as to achieve, in our present world, elements of the ideal?” Rawls’ belief, again, is that we can and should – which is why identifying the ideal is important and relevant.

### Examples of Theological Questions

Finally, I suggest that a distinction between ‘aspirational’ and ‘expectational’ messianism helps us to contextualize recent theological discussions of messianism.

Perhaps we are *not* locked into, per Scholem, some inescapable dialectical process, but rather are free to speculate as to an updated portrayal of an ideal messianic world, which we can then call upon as a basis both for criticizing our second-best world, and moving it forward. I read David Hartman as having sought to encourage such speculation when he wrote of the potential messianic significance of the State of Israel for fostering a transformation of *halakha* to incorporate democratic values, “by accepting messianism as a normative challenge.”<sup>40</sup> In particular, Hartman wrote:

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From the point of view of the *Halakhah*, to be sure, Judaism appears as a well-ordered house; and it is a profound truth that a well-ordered house is a dangerous thing. Something of Messianic apocalypticism penetrates into this house; perhaps I can describe it as a kind of anarchic breeze. (Scholem, *ibid.*, p. 21.)

Again, our suggestion here is that the relationship between visions of the ideal political system, and of halakhic practice within any particular ideal political institution, are *not* governed by any dialectical necessity, but are contingent.

<sup>40</sup> David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (1985; reprinted, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights; 1997), ch. 12, esp. p. 292.

It will not be easy, therefore, to bring John Stuart Mill's advocacy of civil liberty and Isaiah Berlin's appreciation of pluralism into a serious and fruitful discussion with Maimonides and the talmudic tradition's understanding of how a halakhic polity should conduct its daily life.<sup>41</sup> What makes for the spiritual vitality of our third Jewish commonwealth is the fact that we cannot ignore these new fundamental issues.<sup>42</sup>

In a similar vein, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has written, "[God's] is the voice that never ceases to ask why the world-that-is is not yet the world-that-ought-to-be."<sup>43</sup> By contrast, I suggest, Lenn

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<sup>41</sup> Hartman here footnotes to Maimonides' view, e.g., in MT *Hilkhot Gerushin* 2:20, that a *kahal* (קהל, Jewish "communal entity," esp. in the medieval period) is justified in employing coercion against an individual Jew to force him to 'act properly'—because, on Maimonides' understanding of human nature, every Jewish soul wants to do the right thing, and fails to do so only due to extrinsic temptations, such that coercion is 'really' freeing the Jewish soul. For further discussion of Maimonides' support for coercion, see, e.g., Haim Kreisel, "Maimonides' Political Philosophy," pp. 193-220, esp. at pp. 215-218, in Kenneth Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (NY: Cambridge U.P.; 2005).

<sup>42</sup> *A Living Covenant*, p. 296. For my own attempts to incorporate Isaiah Berlin's pluralism into Jewish theology, see "A Philosophic Basis for Halakhic Pluralism," *Conservative Judaism* (henceforth *CJ*) 54:1 (Fall 2001), pp. 60-80; "Halakha and Ethical Pluralism," *CJ* 57:2 (Winter 2005), pp. 58-77; and "Is Theological Pluralism Possible?," *CJ*, 64:4 (Summer 2013), pp. 49-70.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal A Fractured World* (NY: Schocken; 2005), p. 269. Likewise, when Amos 5:18 asks, "Why should you want the day of the Lord?" (translation from the *New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh* of 1985), I suggest that Amos is asking, in effect, 'Do you really think that God would come down and fight to perpetuate the existing social structure? (Would God fight to enshrine a democracy mutilated by the *Citizens United* decision?) Or, rather, don't you think that if God were to come now, God would be very angry? Do you think that justice is now, as it should be, flowing like a mighty stream [cf. 5:24]? And if not, what are you going to do?'

Goodman has misunderstood Rawls's point, as relevant here. In a recent book, Goodman writes, "Rawls follows... a long line of messianic thinking... Rawls puts the cart before the horse, presuming the transformation his utopia requires."<sup>44</sup>

Goodman then, in contrast, reviews his own messianic vision, which imagines that if "everyone" obeys the *halakha*, albeit as suitably updated,<sup>45</sup> then human nature will be transformed – so as to give rise to, and to constitute, in turn, a messianic era.

I suggest that Rawls got the cart and the horse in the right order; he did not presume any transformation but, rather, first sought to identify what we should aspire to.

Hartman, to be sure, also sought to introduce his own distinction into discussion of Messianic speculation—contrasting gradualist "halakhic hope," in which humans and God both participate in the process, with "radical hope," hoping for a sudden change, presumably precipitated by God.<sup>46</sup> Hartman's gradualism may be understood as an effort to further deflate Maimonides' "deflationary" understanding of messianism.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, *Religious Pluralism and Value in the Public Sphere* (NY: Cambridge U.P., 2014), p. 170, fn. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Note Goodman's bracketed insertion (on p. 173), in his review of Maimonides' account of the *halakha* that the Messianic King will enforce, of language to the effect that of course, per Goodman, the Messianic King will need to take into account "the ongoing development" of the Oral Law. I suggest, however, that once the need for such "development" is conceded, the seeming definiteness of Goodman's approach is contradicted.

<sup>46</sup> In *The Search for a New Jewish Self* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights 2012), ch. 7, esp. p. 128, setting forth "Two Types of Hope." This same distinction between gradualistic/evolutionary, and "radical or revolutionary" messianism, is also made in *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism* (New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary 1988), p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Kenneth Seeskin, *Jewish Messianic Thoughts in an Age of Despair* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2012), and his chapter in Michael L. Morgan and Steve Weitzman (eds.), *Rethinking The Messianic Idea In Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U.P. 2015).

In any event, however, I suggest that such a gradual/radical distinction itself continues to *conflate* what should be the *separate* questions of *what* is the ideal, and *how* are we going to get there?

## Moving Forward

It seems to me (and many others) that Judaism faces today two serious threats: in Israel, we face new challenges to Israel's commitment to liberal-democratic, pluralistic, values; and, in the U.S., we as Jews and Americans are challenged to respond to attacks on America's basic democratic institutions. It also appears that traditional Jewish political thought has not been sufficient to meet these challenges.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See my essay, "Judaism and American Civil/Political Society in the Age of Trump" *Zeramik* 1:3 (Spring 2017), pp. 111-129. For recent discussions noting the inadequacy of 'traditional' resources to address these challenges, see, e.g., Haim Shapira, "Majority Rule in the Jewish Legal Tradition" 82-83 *HUCA* (2011-2012) pp. 161-201; and "The Right to Political Participation in Jewish Tradition: Contribution and Challenges" in Dagan, Lifshitz and Stern (eds.), *Religion and the Discourse of Human Rights* (Jerusalem, Israel: Israel Democracy Institute 2014), pp. 266-296 (both available online); Suzanne Last Stone, "The Jewish Tradition and Civil Society," ch. 8 in Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds.), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P. 2000); and David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P. 2000). See also Martin Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U.P. 2014), who writes (at pp. 212-213):

the crux of the issue is teleology: is Torah-observance its own telos, or does the unredeemed nature of the world in which Jews observe Torah disclose a higher telos that determines the framework in which one lives a Jewish life? The narrator of Pes[ik'ta] R[abbati] 34 describes the children of Israel as having "scorned the possibility of redemption." Instead, they adhere to the Torah for its own sake, believing it to be eternally sufficient for maintaining Israel's covenantal obligations, despite the contingent events of

Perhaps, however, it would help, in our ongoing struggles in these non-ideal contexts, to isolate, and then to open-up, the question of ‘aspirational messianism,’ and so to articulate our contemporary ideals.

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Jewish history. From the perspective of the mourners [*avelei tziyon*—אבלי ציון, “the mourners of Zion”], this is insufficient, as it fails to take into account the reality of exile and the necessity of positing the hope for redemption as an essential ground of halachic praxis.