



Shoftim: The Biggest Ir Miklat in History

Redemption is woven into the fabric of both Jewish history and human history. Towards the end of history, Moshiach arrives, a third Mikdash is constructed, and the knowledge of Hashem extends across this world “as the waters cover the ocean beds.” Redemption and Moshaich are each so central to Jewish belief that, according to many, their denial is tantamount to heresy.

Yet strangely, the Torah doesn’t explicitly mention Moshiach. By suppressing direct reference to Moshiach, the Torah firmly anchors us to the affairs of this world. Excess focus on the next era distracts us from the responsibilities and obligations of our current reality. Looking to thwart reckless escapism, the Torah avoids any overt mention of Moshiach.

The Torah does, however, lace numerous pesukim with coded Messianic references. In his extensive comments about the Messianic era, the Rambam (Hilchot Melachim, chapter 11) quotes three of these verses. The first pasuk, taken from Devarim 30:3 describes the return of Jewish exiles from galut:

וְשׁוּב יִקְוֶה אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֶת־שְׁבוּתֶיךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשׁוּב יִקְבְּצֶךָ מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְצִיךָ יִקְוֶה אֱלֹקֶיךָ שְׁמָה

The second pasuk, taken from Bilam’s end-of-days prophecies in Bamidbar 24:17, describes a star discharging from Ya’akov and subduing our enemies:

אֲרָאֲנוּ וְלֹא עָתָה אֲשׁוּרְנוּ וְלֹא קָרוֹב דָּרֶךְ כּוֹכֵב מִיַּעֲקֹב וְקָם שִׁבְט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּמְחַץ פְּאֲתָי מוֹאָב וְיִקְרַח קַל־בְּנֵי־שֵׁט

Each of these verses portray essential Messianic events such as the ingathering of Jewish exiles and the conquest of hostile nations.

The third “Messianic” pasuk cited by the Rambam is taken from parshat Shoftim, in Devarim 18: 8-9 and mandates the addition of three extra arei miklat, or cities of refuge, in our future expanded borders of Israel:

וְאִם־יִרְחִיב יִקְוֶה אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֶת־גְּבֻלְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתָּיִךְ וְנָתַן לְךָ אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר לָתֵת לְאַבְתָּיִךְ...וַיִּסְפַּת לְךָ עוֹד שְׁלֹשׁ עָרִים עַל הַשְּׁלֹשׁ הָאֵלֶּה

Initially three cities of refuge were designated in the East bank of the Jordan river and, subsequently, upon settling the Land of Israel proper, three additional cities were inaugurated. This Messianic pasuk in Shoftim, demands that, as our future country expands, three additional cities must be established.


Though territorial expansion is pivotal to the Messianic era, the concept of ir miklat

itself appears unrelated. Why did the Torah encode Messianic promises within the halacha of ir miklat? How does the twinning between Moshiach and ir miklat alter our Messianic perspective?

MOSHIACH AND HALACHA

Unlike the first two pesukim which portray historical events, this third pasuk contains a mitzvah. As the borders of Messianic Israel expand, we are halachically obligated to install three additional cities of refuge. By tethering a Messianic promise to a halachic mandate, the Torah confirms the inevitability of Moshiach. Halacha is eternal, and, by association, so is the arrival of Moshiach. Each and every halacha instructed by Hashem, must, by definition, have applicability. Streaming Messianic predictions through halacha and not just through historical events, more firmly proves the certainty of Moshiach. If the arrival of Moshiach is associated with a halacha, it too must be inevitable.


Additionally, by signaling Moshiach through halacha, the Torah affirms the immutability of halacha during the Messianic era. There is a dangerous tendency to question the relevancy of halacha in a future redemptive era. The most notorious and extreme form of this anti-nomianist thought was practiced by Shabbat Tzvi, a self-proclaimed false messiah who brazenly violated severe halachic infractions claiming that halacha no longer applied in a utopian era. By fastening the announcement of Moshiach to a mitzvah, the Torah, implicitly upholds the lasting authority of halacha, even under the altered conditions of the Messianic era.

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UTOPIA?

Binding a Messianic prediction to the halacha of ir miklat raises a different, but intriguing question. Will the Messianic era introduce a perfect world? Arei miklat cities provide safe-haven for unintentional murderers, protecting them against revenge killings by relatives of the victim. In a perfect world without violence, no unintentional murder occurs, and arei miklat, presumably, go extinct. Instead of adding three additional cities during the era of Moshiach, we should be dismantling the original six!

Evidently, at least according to this pasuk, the Messianic era will not be a complete overhaul of our current reality, but a continuation of our current order. Unintentional murder will still occur, necessitating cities of refuge and even requiring the

installment of additional cities to accommodate territorial expansion.

This view of Moshiach is consistent with the Rambam's own evolutionary view of Moshiach. For him, Moshiach isn't an apocalyptic shift of our current order but a more natural shift into a world of Jewish sovereignty in Israel centered around the Beit HaMikdash, the termination of war, and a worldwide religious revival. Everything else remains roughly similar to our current situation. Announcing Moshiach through the laws of arei miklat, presumes a Messianic world which includes unintentional murder and which closely resembles our own.

THE IR MIKLAT OF HISTORY

Finally, by encoding the promise of Moshiach within the halacha of ir miklat, the Torah also provides a map or a timeline for the arrival of Moshiach. Our modern return to Israel has aroused broad ideological beliefs and ambitious Messianic assertions. For many, the restoration of Jewish sovereignty, the ingathering of exiles to our ancient homeland are some of the many signs that our long-awaited process of redemption had gradually begun. Yet, Messianic events are shrouded in mystery and draped in confusion, often

leaving us with little other than conjecture. Sadly, our sovereignty isn't complete or ideal, and the ingathering of exiles is still unfinished. We see these as unfinished redemptive "starts" but they come with serious questions marks.

However, there is one event which leaves little to the imagination. The founding of the state of Israel provided refuge for millions of our people fleeing antisemitism. Symbolically it has been the largest ir miklat in our history.

The hundred years prior to the founding of the state were some of the bloodiest years in our long exile, laced with grisly pogroms and, tragically, capped off by the genocidal nightmare of the Holocaust. Independent of any ideological assumptions, at a very basic level, millions of Jews needed an ir miklat to protect them. It is difficult to imagine the fate of our people post- Holocaust without the State of Israel.

In the years since the founding of Israel, it has continued to serve as an ir miklat for Jews fleeing Arabic persecution, European antisemitism, and Communist-era religious suppression. While we still wait for other messianic signals to become absolutely clear, the miracle of the state of Israel as the largest ir miklat in history is undeniable. ■



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