

Ecology, Messiah, and Trees

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb

In his bizarrely philosophical and edgy “Jerusalem,” musician Dan Bern sings that “everybody’s waiting for the messiah.” And since “I know how I hate to wait / like even for a bus or somethin,’” he spares us the suspense by revealing himself: “I am the messiah.” Bern may play guitar and write music better than you or I, but this secular Jew is no more messiah than we are -- and no less. We **are** the messiah, with the power to bring an incremental measure of redemption to the world through our right action. Abraham Joshua Heschel said “an architect of hidden worlds, every pious Jew is, partly, the messiah.” We powerful mini-messiahs, then, must be judicious with our power.

The great first century Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught (Avot d’Rebbe Natan 31b), “if you have a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.” Wow! On the one branch, since Jerusalem was in ruins partly due to intransigent ‘messianic’ Judeans, ben Zakkai is saying “messiah shmessiah, let’s focus on the here and now.” Some of us today, frustrated with Chabad’s messianic fervor or with conversionary efforts by “messianic Jews,” might agree. But on the other branch, if we take ben Zakkai literally, then planting a tree – guaranteeing the future of life on Earth, as it were – is the most sacred thing we can do.

Yes! It is! The ancients knew it when they wrote blessings for eating the tree’s fruit, seeing it blossom in spring, witnessing the beauties of nature. We know it when we celebrate trees preventing soil erosion, regulating the global climate, and providing habitat, shade and oxygen. “When you enter the land and plant’ – even if you find the land full of good things, do not say ‘we will sit and not plant;’ rather be industrious in your plantings” (Tanchuma Kedoshim 19:23). And the Talmudic story about Honi, the old man, and the carob tree (Ta’anit 23a) has the punch line: “just as my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for my descendants.” In our own backyards, or in our homeland, we too can plant trees. But our contemporary challenges are deeper and more complex.

Start with the paper you buy – what’s its post-consumer recycled percentage? The lower the number, the more trees are cut down on your behalf. Or consider construction of your house or Hillel or shul – did you help drive the market for sustainable lumber, or are old-growth joists holding up your suburban floor? What about your coffee – unless it’s shade grown and Fair Trade, tropical trees were cut down and “Juan Valdez” was paid a lousy 50 cents to pick a pound of the stuff. Maybe coffee kashrut could look beyond the creamer?! And since life is partisan, look at the politicians you vote or volunteer for, or try to influence – the party in power is pushing to make our national forests into national tree farms, a policy that messiah-wanna-be’s might not countenance.

If moshiach was a modern poet, I’d vote for Marge Piercy. In “Seedlings in the Mail,” she might be commenting on Honi’s carob tree: “Ah, for people like us, followed / by forwarding addresses and dossiers and limping causes / it takes a crazy despairing faith.../ to plant pine and fir and beech / for somebody else’s grandchildren, / if there are any.” And in “For she is a tree of

life,” after her mom explains *Etz Chayim Hee* to her, she concludes about this cosmic Torah-itic tree: “We all flit through her branches or creep / through her bark, skitter over her leaves. / Yet we are the mice that gnaw at her root / who labor ceaselessly to bring her down. / When the tree falls, we will not rise as plastic / butterfly spaceships, but will starve as the skies / weep hot acid and the earth chafes into dust.”

Unless we change our evil ways, Piercy describes our likely fate. Eleazar ben Pedat (3rd century; Pesikta Rabbati 1:4b) said, “Messiah will come in a generation fit for extinction;” we may well be that generation on the brink. But either way, let’s not sit idly by, waiting for some fantastic intervention to rescue us from ourselves. Let’s instead turn the juggernauts of global warming and loss of species and widening human inequalities around, and build the kind of world into which a messiah figure would feel right at home. Franz Kafka said it best in one of his Parables (Greenberg 65): “The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival.” So ‘Kafkaesquely’, let’s help bring *moshiach* now, and let’s not wait.

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