

The Personal Messiah—Toward the Restoration of a Discarded Doctrine

Into the first blessing of the Eighteen-Prayer, liberal Judaism has introduced one change which is linguistically minor but doctrinally major. The traditional formulation—He “brings a Redeemer”—now reads, He “brings redemption.” This changed liturgical formula persists in practically all authorized liberal prayer books to this day (including the “Conservative” version of Reconstructionism), although the theological reasons which induced the change were among the very earliest issues raised against Orthodoxy at the beginning of the 19th century.

Much, if not most, of the liberal Jewish platform has been modified in these 150 years, and the trend of such modifications has almost unexceptionally been in the direction of a gradual and limited return to the original, traditional position of Judaism. The doctrine of the peoplehood of Israel and the concomitant significance of the earthly Jerusalem for Jewish hopes have long been restored to non-Orthodox religious thinking; the meaningfulness of ritual and ceremonial has been emphatically reasserted; even the validity of the continuous authoritative of Jewish law, if not actually reestablished, is certainly increasingly becoming a matter of major concern to Reform Jews. It is, therefore, a little surprising that almost the only basic claim of pristine Jewish liberalism which has not been subjected to this process of reevaluation in the course of time, should be the doctrine of the Messiah.¹

The reason for this comparative neglect may well be that the doctrine of the Messiah superficially appears to be merely a matter of theory. The question whether the Messianic fulfillment is to be brought about by the instrumentality of a single individual or through the collective progress of humanity seems of little moment when put side by side with such pressing, concrete problems as Zionism, the homogeneity of the Jewish community, the observance of Jewish practice and obedience to Jewish law. If this assumption were correct, it would be perfectly proper to relegate so theoretical a question to the background. And yet, it is very easy to demonstrate that the Messianic doctrine is not academic at all but, on the contrary, exceedingly “practical”;

perhaps it can even be proved that it, too, requires reinvestigation within the framework of contemporary, non-Orthodox Jewish thinking and life.

There were basically three reasons why liberal Judaism in the first half of the 19th century was moved to transform the doctrine of the personal Messiah into the doctrine of the Messianic age—or, to use the phraseology of the Eighteen-Prayer, the doctrine of the Redeemer into the doctrine of redemption. These three reasons can be described respectively as antinationalistic, antimiraculous and optimistic.

In the minds of the early reformers, lay as well as rabbinical, the foremost consideration in favor of the depersonalization of the Messiah certainly seems to have been the fact that they regarded the personal Messiah as inextricably interwoven with the hope of the eventual restoration of the people of Israel from the lands of the Diaspora to Palestine, the reestablishment of the Temple and the sacrificial cult. For the present, it implied the foreign character of Jews in the countries of their domicile. These premises, or implications, of the belief in the personal Messiah they rejected most strenuously. They had begun to receive civil rights in Germany and throughout Western Europe, where Reform had its origin; together with non-Jewish liberals, they continued to agitate for expansion and completion of their citizenship rights; and they confidently looked forward to an early consummation of these aspirations. To declare, at this juncture of history, that they were still awaiting a person who would lead them from their present homes and reconstitute for them a separate nation in a distant land struck them as aiding and abetting their antagonists who insisted on refusing them their civil rights on the grounds that they neither were nor wished to be members of their host nations. Thus, in his report of the pertinent discussions at the Rabbinical Conferences of 1844-1846, Philipson relates that Dr. Mendel Hess identified the personal with the "political" Messiah.² Even earlier, the Frankfort Society of the Friends of Reform, in the single substantive statement of its beliefs, had announced: "A Messiah who is to lead back the Israelites to the land of Palestine is neither expected nor desired by us. [The nonexpectation is understandable and, in this context, logical; the undesirability evokes the ironical picture of the Messiah appearing in Frankfort and being received at the city gates by a delegation of respectable Jewish citizens with the urgent request kindly to remove himself since his presence was likely to obstruct current attempts at the complete emancipation of German Jews.] We know no fatherland except that to which we belong by birth or citizenship." And, in another hemisphere as well, many years later, K. Kohler still says: "A complete change in the religious aspiration of the Jew was brought about by the transformation of his political status and hopes in the nineteenth century. The new era

witnessed his admission in many lands to full citizenship on an equality with his fellow citizens of other faiths . . . He therefore necessarily identified himself completely with the nation whose language and literature had nurtured his mind, and whose political and social destinies he shared with true patriotic fervor. He stood apart from the rest only by virtue of his religion . . . Consequently the hope voiced in the Synagogal liturgy for a return to Palestine, the formation of a Jewish State under a king of the house of David, and the restoration of the sacrificial cult, no longer expressed the views of the Jew in Western civilization. The prayer for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple with its priestly cult could no longer voice his religious hope. Thus the leaders of Reform Judaism in the middle of the nineteenth century declared themselves unanimously opposed to retaining the belief in a personal Messiah . . . They accentuated all the more strongly Israel's hope for a Messianic age, a time of universal knowledge of God and love of man, so intimately interwoven with the religious mission of the Jewish people . . ."³

It may be taken for granted that this particular reason for the abolition of the doctrine of the personal Messiah in liberal Judaism need no longer be taken seriously in the middle of the 20th century. In the further pursuit of the argument quoted above, Kohler explains that Eastern European Jewry, still subject to disenfranchisement and persecution, continues to adhere to the Orthodox longing for a Jewish political restoration—that for this reason Zionism was born there, as an answer to anti-Semitism—and that both of these situations are inapplicable to Western Europe in the first place, and must, in the second place, be made superfluous everywhere else by social progress. The irreconcilability of Zionism with liberal Judaism has long been given the lie in theory as well as in practice and need no longer be argued. But one additional observation must still be made in this connection before we proceed to the next point. It is surely an ironical paradox that Reform Judaism eliminated the personal Messiah because it was held that belief in him was inevitably accompanied by Jewish nationalism, while extreme right-wing orthodoxy of the *Aggudat Yisrael* brand rejected Jewish nationalism because it awaited the advent of this very Messiah! The *Aggudah* argued exactly the other way around: the personal Messiah will redeem the Jewish people; therefore, we must not attempt to anticipate by human action what he will do on divine instruction. Reform remained aloof from Zionism because it did not believe in the personal Messiah, the *Aggudah* remained aloof because it did.

This ironical paradox conclusively illustrates the essential *nonsequitur* of Reform reasoning on this point: whether one believes in the personal Messiah or not has nothing whatever to do with Jewish nationalism. Theoretically,

there is no reason why the personal Messiah must mean Jewish nationalism and the Messianic age must mean “universalism.” It is just as possible, logically, to believe that the Messianic person will bring universal redemption rather than the in-gathering of the Jewish people, and that the Messianic stage in human history will bring with it the national restoration of Israel rather than its complete absorption among the converted nations of the world.⁴ Practically speaking, the outstanding Reform Jews who, during the last half century, were also Zionist leaders do not seem to have been inhibited in their Jewish nationalism by their rejection of the belief in the personal Messiah.

In short, not only has the antinationalistic argument against the doctrine of the personal Messiah been refuted in theory and in fact, but it can be shown never to have been a cogent argument in the first place.

A logically more tenable argument against the personal Messiah was the belief that to await him implied in fact expectation of a miracle. Traditionally, in Bible, Talmud, and post-Talmudic Jewish literature, the functions which the Messiah would fulfill were regarded as being indeed miraculous: nature itself would be transformed to accord with moral requirements, human life would be rid of all natural or moral deficiencies, Israel and Judaism would be established in their proper place of spiritual primacy.⁵ But such a doctrine ran counter, of course, to the positivistic, scientific outlook of 19th century liberals. As Kohler put it straightforwardly: “Our entire mode of thinking demands the complete recognition of the empire of law throughout the universe, manifesting the all-pervasive will of God. The whole cosmic order is one miracle. No room is left for single or exceptional miracles. Only a primitive age could think of God as altering the order of nature which He had fixed, so as to let iron float on water like wood to please one person . . .”⁶

On closer analysis, however, even on its own premises, this objection to the doctrine of the personal Messiah on “scientific,” antimiraculous grounds cannot long be maintained either. In the first place, it is very difficult to understand why the achievement of the Messianic aims by many ordinary people—which is, after all, what the concept of the Messianic age boils down to—is any less miraculous than their achievement by one extraordinary person. Even if it be granted that the state of the world in Messianic times must be considered a miracle from our perspective, a notion which, as we shall see immediately, is not necessary to the doctrine as such, it presumably will be miraculous regardless of the agency through which it is brought about. In one sense, therefore, the transformation of the doctrine does not accomplish this declared aim of rationalization. In the second place, however, it is not at all certain that miraculousness is necessarily one of the ingredients of the Messianic state. Long before the 19th century reformers came along, the med-

aeval Jewish scholastic rationalists, Maimonides himself at their head, on occasion objected to a supernatural interpretation of this tenet: "Let it not occur to anyone that in the days of the Messiah a single thing will be changed in the natural course of the world or that there will be any kind of innovation in nature. Rather the world will continue to exist as it always has . . . The Messiah will come exclusively in order to bring peace to the world . . . How all these things will come about none can know until they have actually come about."⁷ And yet they certainly anticipated the arrival of the person of the Messiah "though he may tarry, at any time." Therefore, as in the case of the antinationalistic objection to the doctrine of the personal Messiah, here, too, a complete *non-sequitur* in the liberal argumentation must be noted: in fact, people, and often "better people than we," have believed in him without subscribing to his miraculous advent. In theory, Messianism is bound up with miraculousness either in both of its variants, the personal and the collective, or in neither. Thus miraculousness cannot decide the issue between them.

We have stated that miraculousness is inherent in the Messianic doctrine even when it is reformulated in liberalistic, collective terms. Apart from the common-sensical argument already adduced to that effect, no better evidence can be added than that of Hermann Cohen, the man who was rightly described by Klatzkin as "a spiritual giant who guarded the inheritance of an impoverished generation"⁸—the liberal generation. In him, liberal theology, including the depersonalization of the Messiah, reached its grand consummation—and if it failed here it must be regarded as having failed *in toto*.

History was for Cohen the infinite human process of striving for the ideal, and Messianism is the term designating the completion of this infinite process. But how can infinity be completed? If, to use an analogy of which Cohen was fond, the ideal state of the future lies on an axis which the curve of human history approaches ever more closely but cannot actually touch, like an asymptote, then perfection is not an ideal whose reality is guaranteed at some point however far removed, but a mathematical impossibility—and there is no guarantee of success at all; to the contrary, there is only a guarantee of relative failure.⁹ The conception of the Messiah as an age leaves humanity swimming desperately in the ocean of history without a shore where he might eventually reach safety. Guttman had pointed out that Cohen's depersonalization of the concept of God had deprived it of the ability to perform the real, historical and ontological function which Cohen himself had ascribed to it.¹⁰ The same must be said of his view of Messianism.¹¹ In fact, the rational picture presents itself in this manner: that there may be such a thing as history at all, progress must be possible; for progress to be possible there must be a logical guarantee of the eventual attainability of the goal of progress; by

Cohen's own admission the goal of progress, perfection, is unattainable through human endeavor. If, therefore, the goal is to be reached at all, it can be reached only by a divine intercession at the end-point of history. And once the theological, even the philosophical necessity of divine, *i.e.* miraculous intercession is established, it becomes absurd and arrogant to declare the concept of the miraculous, personal Messiah out of bounds. To say that the Messianic state must be miraculously brought about, if at all, but not through the miraculous agency of a person, is clearly a purely arbitrary assertion.

Another, usually unexpressed, reason may have contributed to the hostility which the reformers of the last century felt toward the concept of the individual Messiah. Maimonides had stipulated the belief in the bodily Messiah as a fundamental doctrine of Judaism and declared the denier thereof to be a heretic.¹² Taenzer has convincingly demonstrated that Albo relegated this doctrine to a very much lower level of Jewish obligatoriness. On this level, belief or disbelief in the personal Messiah by the individual Jew would be without effect on his full religious status.¹³ In effect, Albo proclaimed not only that a Jew need not necessarily believe in the Messiah but actually, by implication, recommended against such belief. The historical conditions under which he lived explain his attitude. By his time, the doctrine had become a serious obstacle to Jewish theological self-assertion, for it was used to good effect by Christians in formal as well as informal religious disputations. "Also the others [!] make out of it [the Messianic doctrine] a basic principle with which to refute the Torah of Moses."¹⁴ Once the principle of an individual Messiah was accepted, and with the narratives of the New Testament difficult to refute in an age bereft of historical or literary criticism, the crucial issue between Jews and Christians seemed to become one of picking the right person to fit the Messianic prerequisites—an unproductive quarrel at best. By eliminating the Messianic doctrine, Albo hoped to prevent further unconstructive controversies and even to strengthen the Jewish position which could then actually turn the argument around: the Messiah having been declared to be irrelevant to true religion, a religion which made him the central test of faith demonstrated its own unauthenticity.

From the Jewish point of view, the phenomenon of Christological Christianity is, of course, only one of many pseudo-Messianisms. By the 19th century there had been many such movements in Jewish history; some of them extremely unsettling. If enlightened, rationalistic, liberal Christians of that era were embarrassed by the traditional claims of Christianity regarding the historical Jesus, as indeed they were, how much more eager must liberal Jews have been to rid themselves of all the theological preconditions which might again lead, as they had done so often in the past, to the recurrence of enthu-

siastic Messianic claims. One recalls Graetz's immoderate observations on the subject.¹⁵ How easier to answer the claims of traditional Christianity, than to dissociate oneself from Jewish pseudo-Messianisms and the entire Jewish Messianic doctrine, and thus prove the rationality of Judaism. In short, this was Joseph Albo in 19th century disguise.

Perhaps it is no longer necessary to show both the uselessness and the invalidity of this procedure. It is truly a case of throwing out the true gods together with the false ones. If a doctrine is to be rejected because it can be or even has been abused, the very belief in God must be dispensed with, since men have also often represented themselves as God and created havoc by the falsehoods announced in his name. Furthermore, Buber quotes the pointed Chassidic story which compares the pseudo-Messianic movements to wet compresses that keep the patient awake until the doctor comes: "When God saw that the soul of Israel had fallen sick, he covered it with the painful shawl of the *Galuth*. So that it could bear the pains, however, He bestowed upon it the sleep of numbness. Again, so that it would not be destroyed, He awakens it each hour with a false Messianic hope and then lulls it to sleep again until the night will have passed and the real Messiah will appear. For the sake of this work, the eyes of the wise are occasionally blinded."¹⁶ Franz Rosenzweig made the same point in a less anecdotal, more theological and poetic fashion: "The expectation of the coming of the Messiah, by which and because of which Judaism lives, would be a meaningless theologumenon, a mere 'idea' in the philosophical sense, empty babble, if the appearance again and again of a 'false Messiah' did not render it reality and unreality, illusion and disillusion. The false Messiah is as old as the hope for the true Messiah. He is the changing form of this changeless hope. He separates every Jewish generation into those whose faith is strong enough to give themselves up to an illusion, and those whose hope is so strong that they do not allow themselves to be deluded. The former are the better, the latter the stronger. The former bleed as victims on the altar of the eternity of the people, the latter are the priests who perform the service at this altar. And this goes on until the day when all will be reversed, when the belief of the believers will become truth, and the hope of the hoping a lie. Then—and no one knows whether this "then" will not be this very day—the task of the hoping will come to an end and, when the morning of that day breaks, everyone who still belongs among those who hope and not among those who believe will run the risk of being rejected. This danger hovers over the apparently less endangered life of the hopeful."¹⁷ Herein also lies the answer to those who will always worry: if the belief in the personal Messiah as such is granted, why not Jesus? It is true that if I wish to be married I may choose the wrong wife, but does that

prove that I should not look for a wife at all and entirely reject the possibility of marriage?

Underlying all these motivations for the depersonalization of the Messiah-concept lay an optimism about the future of the Jewish people and of humanity as a whole. This optimism resulted in the belief that, as already indicated, the redeemer had become not only impossible and undesirable, but also unnecessary. After all, the Messiah was logically and historically a product of need. In the former sense, the anticipation of his coming implied consciously and unconsciously that humanity alone could not master its destiny or reach its goal. Instead, a divine agent would either have to bring about or at least complete the Messianic, *i.e.* perfect, human society. And historically it is true that, as Israel's historic situation became increasingly hopeless, the concept of the Messiah became increasingly supernatural, for the greater the need the more powerful had to be the person who would triumph over it. "The burden of exile narrowed their horizon. They could see no other way of redemption from their abject position than by supernatural events."¹⁸ Or as Baeck put it impressively: "It was especially true in the centuries of despair: only by seeing before him a mirage was many a man able to procure the strength with which to keep on marching through the desert which life had become for him."¹⁹ Now, in the 19th century, it was believed that such pessimism about the nature of man and the prospects of history had once and for all been refuted.

Certainly, the political development of the times seemed to indicate that the Jewish despair which had so largely formed the concept of the Messiah had become a thing of the past. Everywhere and increasingly Jews were being enfranchised and at least promised, often also given, equal rights with their fellow citizens. Physical persecution, except in some God-forsaken corners of Russia, had almost completely ceased. Liberal democracy was making headway everywhere in the West; material and technological developments were fast progressing. And even culturally, the mellowing of Christianity as evidenced by the new liberal theology, Unitarianism, ethical humanism and similar phenomena, persuaded the usually sober I. M. Wise that America would be Jewish within the foreseeable future. Thus Samuel Hirsch declared: "Everywhere the emancipation of mankind is being striven for so that a morally pure and holy life may be possible of being lived by man on this earth."²⁰ Auerback agreed with him: "In our days the ideals of justice and the brotherhood of men have been so strengthened through the laws and institutions of modern states that they can never again be shattered; we are witnessing an ever nearer approach of the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth through the strivings of mankind."²¹ Herzfeld chimed in: "The conference must declare what it means by redemption; yes, it should state that we are

now entering upon the period of redemption. Freedom and virtue are spreading, the world is growing better.”²² And, of course, the famous Pittsburgh Platform announced: “We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel’s greatest Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men.”²³ In this respect, Wiener summarizes the spirit of the time trenchantly and convincingly: “The new generation was dominated by an almost too gay optimism . . . Transcendent, eschatological ideas receded in the face of the confidence that this world would soon be the scene of divine justice within the moral life of humanity. By the latter was meant above all the completion of equality of civil rights in all countries—which was an understandable preoccupation, though it became embarrassing by being constantly overemphasized.” He recalls that for Moritz Lazarus the outcome of the Dreyfus Affair was positively “a Messianic event.” Wiener indicts this entire generation of shallowly optimistic, self-centered and self-deceiving leaders when he states: “If it is ever true that religious beliefs are the ideological superstructure of the economic-political conditions of society, then it was certainly true of this class. It interpreted and accommodated religious doctrines in conformity with its enthusiastic attitude toward civil society which it regarded as final, eternal, and divine.”²⁴

This outlook no longer deserves a reply. The neo-existentialists—Jewish, Christian, and nonreligious—have effectively knocked down this straw man to build up a case for themselves. Rosenzweig, for example, reports the famous incident in which Hermann Cohen is supposed to have pleaded with him that he must expect the Messiah within no more than fifty years.²⁵ Thus, he wanted to reveal this vapid optimism for the self-deceiving hallucination that it was—and as a symbol his story serves well enough; although we must add that as a truthful report of Cohen’s mind it is a thoroughly incredible tale. It belies everything that Cohen stood for in his affirmation of the infinite Messianic process, his violent rejection of all forms of eudaemonism, and even his definition of the Messiah itself. Nonetheless, that the contemporary pessimists have completely and justifiably defaulted this hallucination cannot be disputed. We have learned for a fact that the 19th century was profoundly wrong in its vast overestimation of the social abilities of humanity. If persecution, pogroms and oppression are indeed the rationale for Messianism, then our age is, and by rights ought to be, the most Messianic age of all in the history of Israel.

If, then, we must discard the third main reason which the liberals of the 19th century proffered for the abolition of the concept of the personal Messiah, literally not one of their arguments has been found to withstand critical

examination. Their antinationalism has been repudiated by Jewish history; their antimiraculousness has been refuted by the necessities of their own position, not to speak of the views of others; their optimism has been repudiated by general history. Furthermore, it turns out that at least two of their reasons were not logically constructed in the first place. In short but brutal fact, their case against the personal Messiah crumbles at first touch.

We could end the argument at this point. Religious tradition must always be regarded as valid until, and unless, invincible reasons are brought forth against it. The reasons militating against the traditional doctrine under consideration have been shown to be anything but invincible, and we may, therefore, with good and calm consciences return to the original position. Ours is not necessarily the task to prove the doctrine positively; to refute its refutation ought to suffice. Nevertheless, without venturing to prove its tenability, there are a few hints which may be given toward the construction of the positive case.

The first is a mere technicality. The liberal prayerbooks of the last century have abounded, and still abound, with phrases which must, if they are to be intellectually acceptable, be interpreted very broadly by the Jews who use them. "The Torah of Moses" is a clear cut an example as any, although there are many others. Do liberal Jews believe that "the" Torah was given to, by, or from Moses? As a matter of fact, the very ritual reading from the Torah has become a metaphoric act for most of them. A very high percentage, certainly well over half, of everything read from it, if it is to be acceptable at all, must be homiletically decontaminated of its original historical, theological, moral, or social intent. And nonetheless these things are retained—reinterpreted but retained. Yet the phrase "Who brings a redeemer" cannot be so treated; it must be changed! All that was required to bring the traditional text into conformity with liberal belief was the interchange of a single letter of the Hebrew alphabet, a *Heh* at the end for a *Vav* in the middle of the word. But this had to be done through a surgical operation on the prayerbook, when much more serious problems were solved with exegetical palliatives. We may assuredly draw two conclusions from this observation: 1. There was more to this than meets the eye; more fundamental interests were involved than those that were expressed; 2. A return to the original phrase is justified if only because it will violate no one's conscience; completely free exegesis will still be offered to anyone who wishes to take advantage of it.

In analyzing the views of Hermann Cohen, we pointed out the intimate connection between the belief in the personality of the Messiah and the belief in the personality of God. For him, as for the liberal mentality in general, the entire concept of personality as such was a terrible stumbling block. As

Kierkegaard and existentialism never tire of pointing out, the existence of the individual personality defies all the universal and theoretical laws of science as well as of idealism. They, therefore, try to dissolve it into general propositions. God as an idea, the Messiah as an age—these are entities with which theoretical reason can deal. The persons of God and of the Messiah, on the other hand, are hard, stubborn, even—as it were— empiric realities that defy classification. But then, so does every individual. And thus, the depersonalization process does not stop with God or the Messiah so far as liberalism was concerned.

A change was likewise introduced into the second benediction of the *Amidah*. “Praised be Thou, O Lord, who bringest to life the dead” seemed to be a liturgical formulation of the doctrine of resurrection, and this doctrine was regarded as outmoded as the reference to the personal Messiah. Do we not know that the body decomposes in the grave? Where would physical resurrection take place in the spiritual world of God? Does not the belief in the eternity of the body imply a vast overemphasis on the material aspect of life? And so the modernistic arguments ran. Therefore, again the liturgical formulation was changed, and so remains to this day: “Praised be Thou, who hast implanted within us eternal life.” In this manner, belief in the immortality of the soul was substituted for the concept of resurrection of the body.

The rejection of the belief in resurrection is closely connected with the rejection of the personal Messiah—not only because they both found expression at the very beginning of the *Amidah*. Ever since Ezekiel pictured the Messianic rebirth of Israel in terms of the famous revived bones, one of the traditional marks of the advent of the Messiah in Jewish thought has been the resurrection of the dead.²⁶ “May the All-merciful make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come.”²⁷ And at the Conference of American Reform rabbis in Philadelphia in 1869, the rejection of the one doctrine was immediately and logically followed up with the rejection of the other.²⁸ Thus, the depersonalization process has gone one step further: God is not a person but an idea or a force; the Messiah is not a person but an age; and each man and woman is not a person but a universal reason confined in an individualizing and debasing body—a state of affairs fortunately remedied in the hereafter!

Herein also lies the most important reason for our time for a return to the personalism of the Messiah. Not only have we reacknowledged the unitary character of the human person: if scientific conclusions have any bearing on this discussion, they tend to assert the indivisibility, even the indistinguishability of “body” and “soul”. Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue is premised on the recognition of persons, human and divine, as the carriers of life.

The outlook of the Bible which deals with “the whole man” is reasserting itself in the form of what is called “personalism.” Baeck²⁹ “describes this outlook in these words: “It is particularly true of prophetic thinking that it is far removed from abstract descriptions and instead envisages the figure of a real human being with its views and deeds. The prophets speak less of a future time than of a future person. The ideal of the future becomes for them an ideal personality . . . The son of David is the future man. As a man of flesh and blood he makes real and vivid what the ideal man ought to be and will be.” As Tillich puts it: “Ontology generalizes, while Biblical religion individualizes.”³⁰ And specifically with regard to the Messiah, the “liberal” Wiener puts the case clearly: “It is always the great miracle, the emergence into overpowering visibility of the deeds of God Himself, which characterize the days of the Messiah—the expression of the personal shaping of world history by the personal God. For this reason so much emphasis is put on the personality of the Messiah . . . It is precisely in the belief in the Messiah that one can recognize the full vitality of a religiosity for which God is personality and His revelation and tangible guidance by means of miracle. One is inclined to say that at this point piety is most distantly removed from everything abstract, from conceptual ideology—and that it rather becomes faith in the true sense of the word, believing confidence in the revelation of concrete facts.”³¹ We have learned from religious as well as nonreligious existentialism, that all moral reality, as distinguished from nature or mathematics, is the reality of persons. The individual, the person, is the *locus* of ethics, not ages, ideas, or forces. The Messianic age is a utopia; the Messiah is a concrete, though future, reality.

Let us consider one last objection which will be raised against this view. It will be said again, as it has often been said in the past, that reliance on the Messianic fulfillment will lead to moral quietism and passivism. If people expect a divine agent to bring about perfection, they will sit back, relax their own efforts toward the good, and leave to the Messiah the work they themselves ought to do. This has, indeed, often happened. Was it not a delegation of Orthodox rabbis of the *Aggudah* type who requested the British mandatory governor not to withdraw his troops since Zionism was human supererogation anyway, and the Messiah was to come in 1999? But the drawing of an improper conclusion does not mean that the doctrine ought be abolished: It ought rather be protected against false interpreters.

“Perish all those who calculate the end,”³² was the motto of the Talmudic rabbis who opposed the view that the Messianic time was fixed mechanically without regard to the human contribution to its hastening. They taught emphatically that the arrival of the Messiah was dependent upon human actions: if they were good it would be sooner, if evil—later. “God said: every-

thing depends on you. Just as the rose grows with its heart toward heaven, so do you repent before Me and turn your hearts heavenward, and I will thereupon cause your redeemer to appear.”³³ There is even the view, which commends itself on ethical grounds, that the Messiah will appear after the Messianic state has been established, leaving its attainment to humanity but guaranteeing its maintenance thereafter. Even Mendelsohn seems to have held this view.³⁴ The 19th century proto-Zionist, R. Hirsch Kalischer, stipulated the return to Zion as a prerequisite, not consequence, of the Messianic advent.³⁵ And even the man who was later to become one of the foremost and most radical leaders of American Reform, Samuel Hirsch, in the days before he went to greater extremes, advanced this same thought. “It is up to us to turn to God, for the Messiah cannot come before we have become completely good . . . No, it is not the duty of the Messiah but that of the entire household of the vanguard against evil, the entire house of Jacob, to wage this battle on behalf of all the inhabitants of the world, and the root of Jesse cannot shoot forth out of its midst until it has fulfilled this duty and carried out its task.”³⁶

Therefore, not only is it untrue that the doctrine of the personal Messiah must necessarily lead to quietism. On the contrary, it can help in suppressing the peculiar modern variation of pseudo-Messianism. One of the most horrible and disastrous illusions to which modern humanity has fallen prey is that it has actually accomplished the Messianic state. It is on the basis of this self-deception that our contemporary dictatorships have ruthlessly eliminated all dissent, for they maintain that dissent from perfection is, by definition, falsehood. Whereas in the Middle Ages pseudo-Messianisms operated around a central, individual pseudo-Messianic person, in our time it is characteristic of our collectivist and societally-minded frame of references that pseudo-Messianisms take the form of national movements. More than ever, therefore, the absence of the person of the redeemer should constitute a constant warning against such blasphemous exaggerations. This warning is, furthermore, not without its applicability to the present Jewish world situation. The Messianic undercurrent in the history of modern Zionism has in turn led to the far-reaching secularization of “the Messianic thought in Israel,” as a result of which, as Leon Roth has pointed out, we no longer ask in the words of the Bible: “Who will recount the mighty deeds of God?” but rather in the words of the Israeli song: “Who will recount the mighty deeds of Israel?” What is even much more dangerous is the hazy notion floating through the minds of a not inconsiderable number of super-Zionists that the establishment of the State itself constitutes the Messianic fulfillment. Here lies the road to certain disaster! When Rabbi Kurt Wilhelm, formerly of Jerusalem and now chief rabbi of Sweden, and this writer dared point out in a series of articles that Jewishly there

is a vast difference between *yeshuah*, historical salvaging, and *ge'ulah*, redemption, an Israeli newspaper attacked us vehemently as new *Protestrabbiner!*³⁷ If this journalist had only been waiting for the Messiah!