

A Covenant Cocktail: The Messianic Idea in Judaism
Parashat Va'era; January 23, 2004

A new year dawns, fresh in our minds still. The turn of the Millennium lies just a bit in the background, and with it all the worry, all the Y2K speculation, all the fervor of the Christian world expectant of Something Significant, about to happen. Hollywood answers; Mel Gibson's *Passion* will be unleashed next month. In the deep dark of winter comes the baited breath, the most heart-felt hope for salvation and rebirth, and light.

But I begin at a time long ago, in a place far away. I begin with one of the mysteries of Scripture, another in a long list of apparent contradictions found throughout the Torah. For it was the pre-commitment of the rabbinic mind to perfection in these words, the notion on the part of the ancient rabbis that what seemed to be a simple error had to have happened for a reason, that would not allow a scribal faux pas to go unexplained, nor a contradiction to go unexplored as an opportunity for deeper, hidden meaning.

And what is the contradiction we find, in the very first words of this week's Torah portion? "*Va'eira el-Avraham el-Yitzchak v'el-Ya'akov b'Eil Shadai, u'shmi Adonai Lo Nodati Lahem!*" I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, as God Almighty – but My name Adonai I did not reveal to them." Only Moses will now know God's name. Only Moses will understand its power. Except that in this instance, only Moses is fooled.

For we... we the readers know, we remember, we read in Genesis time and time again: “*Ani Adonai!* I am Adonai!” God indeed uses the Divine name in encounters with the Patriarchs of Genesis. It is not a dream. It is a direct quote. So why the confusion? Why the contradiction? Why the obfuscation here?

The discrepancy begs for an answer. And here is what the sages say: it is not the simple name being referred to with Moses here. The name means something. The Tetragrammaton. “I am what I am.” Or: “I am that which I will be.” God, as the One who fulfills the promises of the past. God, as Enabler. More, God as Deliverer. The very *name* of God implies the ability to bring about the future. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they heard the promise. But the future is now. The promise is about to unfold in the present. The Patriarchs may have heard a name. But Moses would know its power. God’s name would be fulfilled; Redemption was at hand.

Redemption – but not a Redeemer! Not on the human stage, at least. It is *God’s* name that contains the fulfillment of the future. Despite the defensive catch-phrases of a one-upsmen future – phrases like “Jesus saves, Moses invests!” – Moses was revered, but he was never worshipped. He is even dropped altogether from the traditional Passover *haggadah*, denied his logical place, not mentioned at all for fear that we might see *him* and not God as the true Savior of our people! All this to emphasize: it is *God* that brings redemption.

How, then, have we wound up with a world so dominated by the idea of a human savior – even if, in one tradition, this figure is ingeniously at once both man and god? How has the idea of a Messiah come to hold such a powerful place in the development of Western spiritual and intellectual history? My friends, I say what I am about to say with some hesitation, and with some trepidation. But I believe that one of the most important ideas in the history of the world may have been the result of... an accident!

Let us go back to the beginning, or, at least, to the tale we tell of genesis, of the origin of the world. Perhaps the single most important idea in the entire Hebrew Bible is present early on, from the first encounter God has with creation. For in describing divinity, we tell a tale not of a passive Force or a quiescent cosmos, but of encounter. And relationship. And where there is relationship, there are terms of interaction. And where there are terms of interaction, there is the concept of covenant.

The word for “covenant” in Hebrew is “*brit*.” (Yes, the word “brit”, or “bris”, means “covenant,” not “circumcision,” since “bris” is only -- you should pardon the pun – the shortened form of the full phrase “brit milah, covenant of circumcision.”) And again, from the earliest stories of Genesis we learn... that there are two kinds of covenants. There are conditional covenants, with a desired outcome realized or retained only on condition that certain terms are fulfilled or

obligations are met. And there are unconditional covenants, which express a divine commitment, which is often sealed by some kind of sign, and which is not dependent on particular behavior or reciprocity.

Let us turn, for a moment, to look at the very first covenant in the Bible. **[Genesis 2:15-17, JPS p. 4].** This is quite clearly a conditional covenant. God told Adam and Eve that they could live in the Garden of Eden if they did not eat the fruit of a certain tree. The rest is history. (Or not.)

If Brit Adam was a conditional covenant, than Brit Noach, the second major covenant in the Bible, was unconditional. **[Genesis 9:8-17, p. 16]** God told Noah that God would not destroy the world with water again. Period. End of story. Human behavior had hardly changed: the very first thing Noah goes out and does is invent viticulture, get smashed off his... rocker... and have some sort of ugly incident with his son the details of which cannot be described at a service where there might be youngsters present (much less in a school classroom! As to all those people who think that the Bible should be read in public schools – I’m not sure they have actually read it themselves!) The rainbow is a sign of the covenant, but the promise is unconditional.

The covenant of Adam and the covenant of Noah -- neither one concerns me at the moment. For it is the subsequent chapters of Biblical history, the covenants to come -- three of them in particular -- which I believe give accidental birth to a concept that shook the world.

We move from universal (pre)history, to the history of our people. We turn to the first monotheist, the first Jew, the first successful long-term relationship God manages to have with a human being in the book of Genesis. We turn to Abraham.

Step One. Brit Avraham. The covenant of Abraham. **[Genesis 17:1-13, JPS pp. 28-29]** The sign is circumcision, that much we know. But what is the promise? What are the terms?

God promises Abraham that God will give him the land of Canaan, to him and his descendants. Forever. Period. Unconditionally. Brit Avraham thus contains within it an eternal claim to the land.

Step Two. The rest of the Torah. Brit Moshe, the covenant of Moses. The ideology here is articulated with the most eloquence and rhetorical flourish in the book of Deuteronomy, but it is found throughout the final four books of the Torah. **[Leviticus 26:14-17, 31-33, JPS pp. 270-271; Deuteronomy 28:15, 36-37]**

and 69, JPS pp. 434, 435 and 438] God lays it on the line: life or death, the blessing or the curse. It is up to us. If we follow the ways of God, we will live in the land in security. If we do not, than plagues and pestilence and pesky dental problems will follow, we will suffer low sperm counts and long lines at the store, we will be exiled from the land, and wander the face of the earth. The choice is ours, but the words are clear: the covenant of Moses, whether we live on the land and feel the bounty of God's blessing, is conditional. It depends on our behavior.

Step Three. We jump ahead, to the story of David. A shephard-musician is elevated to the kingship of Israel. And God makes another promise. **[2 Samuel 7:8-16, JPS pp. 657-658]** Your descendants will be the rulers of the Jewish people for all time. No qualms. And no quality control. Period. Brit David. The covenant of David. An unconditional promise.

Three covenants. Three different situations. But mix them together, and out of the froth of time comes the most potent message of hope in all of human history. Let's look at the implications.

The Jewish people have an eternal claim to the land of Canaan/Israel (Brit Avraham.) But whether we actualize that claim, whether we enjoy it, whether we actually get to live on the land -- that depends on us (Brit Moshe). And: there is a family who is destined to be the leaders of our people forever (Brit David).

It doesn't take much stirring to see what happens. There will come a time when we no longer merit living on the land. But we still have a claim to it. So someday, somewhere, somehow, when we are ready once again, the proper ruler of our people will reemerge. To lead us back to life on the land.

That's it. That is the idea of the Messiah. Fully formed... from working out the details of three previous promises.

And that is the Messiah's original job description in Judaism. To take us home again. That's the only entry on the resume. None of this making the snow melt in a blizzard, or eliminating the need for protective fences in zoos. None of this end of history stuff, or bones rising from the earth -- all of that came later, accretions and additions, some in Judaism and considerably more in Christianity, to an idea that emerged from the promises of yesterday.

The most important idea in history, an accident of implication. Unless, of course, there are no accidents.

My friends, I do not know what redemption means for each one of you individually. I have some sense of what it might mean, for a wounded and still broken world. But I know what I learn from our tradition: that there are some things that are given, and there are some things that depend on our actions. And

that somehow, somewhere, in the midst of living out our lives, somehow there is a prayer, and a promise. Exiles all from the center of our being, there is a chance for us all. That we can find our way. That there will be those who can lead us. But that ultimately the choice is ours. A prayer and a promise. That redemption is possible. That we can go home again. Shabbat Shalom.