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# **SHI'ITE MAHDISM AND JEWISH MESSIANISM:**

**THE AMBIVALENT MINGLING OF PIETY AND POLITICS**

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## [Introduction]

This essay is an exercise in comparative political theology, examining two different eschatological traditions with their hopes and envisioned scenarios for redemption. The primary focus is on Twelver Shi'ism and its teachings about the *Mahdi*. The last of twelve Imams venerated by most faithful Shi'ites, the *Mahdi* is sometimes called the "Hidden Imam" because of his centuries-long concealment, or occultation. His triumphant return to the stage of human history is eagerly anticipated as part of God's plan to rectify global injustices and bring about the victory of Shi'ite Islam over its Sunni rivals. The spiritually ennobling aspects of this tradition will be explored, along with more problematic ones which are especially pertinent for our own time, when Shi'ites have attained political power in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries.

A secondary focus of this essay is *Jewish* messianism, a long and multi-faceted tradition in its own right and one which presents its own political challenges today, given the empowerment of Jews in the state of Israel and the claims of some Jewish Israelis to be catalysts of the messianic redemption.

The common thread linking these two eschatologies is the impact on human spirituality and on the wider society when piety and power politics are intermingled. In either case, the result of this admixture reflects a more general religious phenomenon that R. Scott Appleby calls "the ambivalence of the sacred."<sup>1</sup> History has repeatedly shown that religion is a force for both good and evil. All religious traditions nourish the human spirit, bringing their adherents closer to the Divine and inspiring self-sacrifice; but they also exacerbate self-glorifying, intolerant, and even violent tendencies in the human personality. Especially when communities of faith experience powerlessness and persecution, they can be led astray by vengeful leaders who channel their followers' anger in destructive ways. All too often these leaders invoke God and sacred texts as authorities for their violent actions. This negative tendency in religion is evident in contemporary Middle East affairs, with unfortunate repercussions worldwide.

The suffering engendered by militant messianists who hold extremist interpretations of the different Abrahamic faiths prompts some fundamental questions: What happens when end-time scenarios that have consoled and inspired the faithful over centuries become the agendas of nation states or armed political movements? Is there any way for the destructive potential within these eschatological traditions to be countered by more compassionate and peace-oriented elements within the same traditions? And could Shi'ite Muslims and devoutly religious Jews find common ground in their respective traditions about human suffering and God's promise of ultimate redemption? These challenging questions are beyond the ability of any author to adequately address in a short essay. It is my hope that this reflection will stimulate further thought and constructive action in the service of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Jews.

## An Overview of the Shi'ite Tradition on the Mahdi

The Arabic term *mahdi* does not appear in the Qur'an but, as Wilferd Madelung notes, "the name is clearly derived from the Arabic root *h-d-y* commonly used in [the Qur'an] in the meaning of divine guidance. As an honorific epithet without messianic significance, the term was employed from the beginning of Islam," with varying references to the Prophet Muhammad, the patriarch Abraham, Muhammad's grandson Hussein, the central sacrificial figure for Shi'ites, and later Sunni caliphs. In early Islamic history, "after the death of Mu'awiya [in 680 C.E.], the term came first to be used for an expected ruler who would restore Islam to its original perfection."<sup>2</sup> This yearning for restoration reflected the profound sense that, with the internecine strife that beset the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad, some pristine purity or perfection was lost. Consequently, redemption of the Islamic *umma*, indeed of all humanity, demanded that God bring about a global, if not cosmic, rectification. This redemptive climax to history, anticipated by all Muslims, is to have both a spiritual and socio-political dimension, just as Muhammad was both the spiritual and the political ruler of Medina. For Shi'ites, the tragedy of Karbala in 680 C.E., when Hussein and his companions were slaughtered by the Umayyad ruler Yazid, Mu'awiya's son, added yet another level of loss and injustice. A profound existential trauma occurred with ripple effects throughout history. The spiritual violation experienced by Shi'ites as a result of Hussein's martyrdom is of such a magnitude that it needs to be redeemed through Divine intervention. In this cosmic drama of redemption the *Mahdi* plays a central role, especially for Shi'ites.

Sunni Muslims also believe in the coming of a Redeemer and Restorer called the *Mahdi*, the rightly-guided eschatological ruler sent by God, citing various *hadith* traditions as justification. They see him appearing at the end of history, together with the second coming of Jesus, as part of the eschaton. And some Sunni caliphs, especially of the 'Abbasid period, assumed eschatological titles, including *Mahdi*, for themselves or their heirs to enhance their prestige and, perhaps, to presage a redemptive transformation of history. Still, Mahdism was not as central to Sunni piety as it became for Shi'ism. Madelung writes:

In spite of the support [for] the belief in the Mahdi by some prominent traditionists and Sufis, it never became an essential part of Sunni religious doctrine. Sunni creeds mention it but rarely. Many famous scholars like al-Ghazali avoided discussing the subject. This attitude was...probably less motivated by doubts concerning the truth of the belief than by fear of encouraging politically disruptive movements in the Muslim community.<sup>3</sup>

"Traditions supporting the view that the Mahdi would be a descendant of Muhammad and his daughter Fatima spread in the early 'Abbasid age," according to Madelung.<sup>4</sup> One hadith that circulated was: "The Messenger of God said, 'The Mahdi will be from me, with a bald forehead and an aquiline nose. He will fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with injustice and oppression and will rule seven years.'" Another prophetic *hadith* that spread was: "The Mahdi will be of my family from the descendants of Fatima."<sup>5</sup> Such traditions supported Shi'ite claims to Islamic

legitimacy and authority, since Shi'ism rests on the belief that the true heirs of the Prophet Muhammad, spiritually and politically, are his progeny or members of his household, *ahl al-bayt*, through his daughter Fatima and her husband 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph (also for Sunnis) and the first Shi'ite Imam. As Madelung observes:

Among the Shi'a, especially the more radical groups, longing for a restorer of justice and religion has usually been most intense. Belief in the coming of the Mahdi from the Family of the Prophet became a central aspect of the faith in radical [as well as normative - YL] Shi'ism in contrast to Sunnism. Distinctively Shi'i was also the common belief in a temporary absence or occultation (*ghayba*) of the Mahdi and his eventual return in glory. As various members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* were identified as the Mahdi but failed to fulfill the expectations about him in their lifetime, their followers transferred their hopes to a second coming.<sup>6</sup>

The Shi'ite scholar 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i expounds on the identity and role of the *Mahdi*:

The promised Mahdi, who is usually mentioned by his title of *Imam-i 'Asr* (the Imam of the "Period") and *Sahib al-Zaman* (the Lord of the Age), is the son of the eleventh Imam [Hasan Al-'Askari]. His name is the same as that of the Holy Prophet. He was born in Samarra in 256/868 and until 260/872 when his father was martyred, lived under his father's care and tutelage. He was hidden from public view and only a few of the elite among the Shi'ah were able to meet him.

After the martyrdom of his father he became Imam and by Divine Command went into occultation (*ghaybah*). Thereafter he appeared only to his deputies (*na'ib*) and even then only in exceptional circumstances...

The occultation of the twelfth Imam is...divided into two parts: the first, the minor occultation (*ghaybat-i sughra*) which began in 260/872 and ended in 329/939, lasting about seventy years; the second, the major occultation [*ghaybat-i kubra*] which commenced in 329/939 and will continue as long as God wills it. In a *hadith* upon whose authenticity everyone agrees, the Holy Prophet has said, "If there were to remain in the life of the world but one day, God would prolong that day until He sends in it a man from my community and my household. His name will be the same as my name. He will fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with oppression and tyranny."<sup>7</sup>

Tabataba'i, addressing the opponents of Shi'ism, defends the belief in the Twelfth Imam's lengthy occultation and his anticipated return as the *Mahdi* to redeem all of humanity. In so doing, he also elucidates the esoteric function of all twelve Imams in Shi'ite understanding:

The opponents say that if God wills to bring forth an Imam to reform mankind He is able to create him at the necessary moment and does not need to create him thousands of years earlier. In answer it must be said that such people have not really understood the meaning of the Imam, for...the duty of the Imam is not only the formal explanation of the religious sciences and exoteric guidance of the people. In the same way that he has the duty of guiding men outwardly, the Imam also bears the function of *walayah* and the esoteric guidance of men. It is he who directs man's spiritual life and

orients the inner aspect of human action toward God. Clearly, his physical presence or absence has no effect in this matter. The Imam watches over men inwardly and is in communion with the soul and spirit of men even if he be hidden from their physical eyes. His existence is always necessary even if the time has not as yet arrived for his outward appearance and the universal reconstruction that he is to bring about.<sup>8</sup>

Along with this esoteric function of the Imams, their role as communal leaders reflected a political function different from that of the Sunni caliphs. The latter ruled over the empowered majority within the Islamic empire; and because of Shi'ite opposition to their legitimacy, they were often suspicious of the Imams' intentions and felt threatened by their followers' messianic aspirations. Over time, one of the Shi'ite traditions about the *Mahdi* was that he will rise up with a sword - hence the other primary epithet associated with the Redeemer, *al-Qa'im*, he who will arise<sup>9</sup> - to assume power and exact revenge on the Sunni rulers who had deprived Shi'ites of their rightful place in the Divine plan. As Hossein Modarressi explains, the term *Mahdi* (as a general Islamic concept, "the rightly guided one," shared by Sunnis and Shi'ites alike) originally had no Imamite connotations, but over time it was absorbed into Shi'ite tradition and amalgamated with the Imamate, crystallizing finally into the doctrine of the Twelfth/Hidden Imam.

The rank and file of the Imamites tended to identify this savior of the earth with the *qa'im* who would establish the rule of truth. The link between the two concepts [*qa'im* and *mahdi*] had already been reportedly advocated by some splinter groups who "stopped" with certain Imams on the assumption that they were the *qa'im* and the *mahdi*...[W]hile the reference to the concept of *mahdi* in connection to the vanished son of Hasan al-'Askari is absent in the Imamite works written in the last decades of the third/ninth century, even in those that describe him as the *qa'im*, by the first decades of the following century when Kulayni finished his *Kitab al-Kafi* and 'Ali b. Babawayh al-Qummi wrote his *Kitab al-Imama wa 'l-tabsira min al-hayra*, the vanished Imam was already the one who was to reappear to "fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with oppression and injustice."<sup>10</sup>

To fully understand the role of the *Mahdi* in Shi'ite eschatology, one must first grasp the status of the Imam in Twelver Shi'ism. For the *Mahdi* is experienced - not just theoretically posited - as the twelfth and last Imam in the lineage extending from 'Ali and Fatima. The historian and Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr offers this helpful overview:

The Shi'ites separated from the Sunnis upon the death of the Prophet when the question of succession became vital. The majority of the community chose Abu Bakr, the venerable friend of the Prophet, as the first caliph..., while a small number believed that 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, should have become caliph. The problem, was however, more profound than one of personalities. It also concerned the function of the person who was to succeed the Prophet. The Sunnis believed that the function of such a person should be to protect the Divine Law, act as judge, and rule over the community, preserving public order and the borders of the Islamic world. The Shi'ites believed that such a person should also be able

to interpret the Quran and the Law and in fact possess inward knowledge. Therefore, he had to be chosen by God and the Prophet, not by the community. Such a figure was called *Imam*. Although such a person did not share in the Prophet's prophetic function (*nubuwwah*), he did receive the inner spiritual power of the Prophet (*walayah/wilayah*).<sup>11</sup>

Nasr explains that, for Shi'ites, the rightful successor to Muhammad was 'Ali, the fourth caliph and the first Shi'ite Imam, "the later Imams all being descendants of 'Ali and Fatimah, the daughter of the prophet." Historian and comparative religionist Mahmoud Ayoub conveys his own understanding of the Shi'ite Imam's status in the following statement:

One of the earliest and most elaborate responses to the problem of succession was the Shi'i doctrine of the imamate. This doctrine, however, was formulated by a persecuted minority, and over several centuries. While its ideal view of religio-temporal authority in Islam exerted much influence on Muslim, and particularly Sufi, piety, the Shi'i community had neither the strength nor the unity to implement it. Furthermore, the Shi'i option raised the imam to the status of the Prophet, insisted on Divine/Prophetic designation (*nass*) rather than popular choice of the imam, and confined this Divine office to particular member of the Prophet's family. Because, moreover, this ideal doctrine could not be realized within the earthly life of the Muslim *ummah*, the imam, as the only true successor to the Prophet, was pushed out of world history altogether and into eschatological time...

The imam is not only a manifestation of Divine grace, but of Divine justice as well...Shi'ism, as a developed legal and theological system (*madhhab*) still awaits a just and equitable state (*dawlah*) under a just imam. This hope is daily prayed for by Twelver Imami Shi'is in the words: "O God, we beseech you for a noble state in which you bestow honor on Islam and its people and humiliation on hypocrisy and its people."<sup>12</sup>

One of the most instructive examinations of the *Mahdi* tradition in Shi'ite Islam, especially its pietistic dimension, is found in Ayoub's book, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*. Ayoub is an appreciative scholar of different religions, including Christianity, as evidenced in the following passage:

The twelfth *Imam*, the *Mahdi*,...mirrors in his personality and mission the judging and victorious Christ, the Christ who is to come on the clouds of heaven, whose return the community still awaits with anxious anticipation. The time of his concealment (*ghaybah*) is a time of travail, a period of disintegration which must precede the final restoration. Finally, like the second coming of Christ, his reappearance or return (*raj'ah*) will be a time of fear and remorse, of going astray and general chaos. All this, however, will be followed by a long period of peace, prosperity, and the final triumph of truth over falsehood when justice and equity will reign forever.<sup>13</sup>

Ayoub explores the "vast and complex" tradition surrounding the birth<sup>14</sup>, occultation, and return of the *Mahdi*. He presents various aspects of this tradition, more than we can examine here in any detail. Overall, "[t]he personality of the hidden Imam has provided *Shi'i* piety with rich soil for the most fantastic hagiographical imagination...The coming of the *Mahdi* at



the end of human history will be the fulfillment of the mission of all the prophets before him and the time of their final vindication.”<sup>15</sup>

Ayoub explains how Mahdism evolved in response to competing needs and pressures:

The last prophet, Muhammad, and the *imams* after him, announced the coming of the *Mahdi*; traditions related from the *imams* display an air of impatient expectancy on the part of the community...There is no doubt, in our view, that both the *imams* and their followers expected a victorious future *imam* who would succeed where Husayn had failed and who would attain power for himself and his community. Such expectations could be very dangerous, and thus the *imams* had to keep this hope alive without kindling the zeal of their followers into an armed revolt. They therefore constructed an increasingly complex metaphysical and theological cult of the *Mahdi*. His birth, occultation, and return were beyond the knowledge of any man and it was even unlawful for the *imams*' followers to speculate about such things. Not even his name was to be mentioned; men were to refer to him only by his many titles and epithets, such as: *al-Qa'im* (the rising one), *Hujjat al-Muhammad* (the proof of the family of Muhammad), *Sahib al-Zaman* (master of the age), and, of course, the *Mahdi*.<sup>16</sup>

Because the Mahdi “will come to complete the task of Husayn, the great martyr of Karbala...he shall appear, according to many traditions, on the day of 'Ashura [the tenth day of *Muharram*, the first month in the Islamic calendar], the day on which Husayn, son of 'Ali, was killed. He shall appear first in Mecca, the holiest city of Islam, but will make his headquarters in Kufa. There, where 'Ali was killed and buried, and nearby Karbala, the sacred shrine of Husayn, the *Mahdi* will have his seat of judgment.”<sup>17</sup>

As in other eschatological traditions (including Judaism and Christianity) that anticipate the appearance of a savior at the end of history, the return of the *Mahdi* has a universalist or cosmic dimension, along with a more particularist or communal aspect. On the one hand, “the *Mahdi* will save humanity and the entire creation from degeneration.”<sup>18</sup> Global corruption and tyranny will end with the dawn of a new era of universal justice and equity, followed by the final collective resurrection. Ayoub's interreligious sensibility yields this comparative reading of Shi'ite tradition: “The era of the Mahdi is like the peaceable kingdom envisioned by the ancient prophet of Israel. The Shi'i vision of an era of absolute peace, prosperity and blessings goes further than the Isaianic vision, resembling more closely perhaps the new earth envisioned by the venerable seer of Patmos, St. John the Divine.”<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, “Shi'i piety could not accept an eschatology which did not include the Prophet, 'Ali, and his two sons, Hasan and Husayn. In particular, the return (*karrah*) of Husayn to avenge his own blood was promised early.” Consequently, the *Mahdi* and Husayn, two archetypal and iconographic Imams, are seen in Shi'ism as allies in the eschatological drama - in some scenarios accompanied by prophets and angels - with the *Mahdi*, in sources that reflected centuries of oppression, “regarded first and foremost as an avenger and only secondarily as the messiah at whose hands God would establish equity and justice in the earth.”<sup>20</sup> In this “mixed



blessing” anticipated by Shi’ite believers at the end of history, combining vengeance and violence with messianic peace and justice, we confront what Appleby terms the “ambivalence of the sacred.” This admixture of bloodshed and beatific harmony is perhaps most strikingly apparent in cases where chronically oppressed faith communities develop a violent “liberation theology.” They look forward to a future victory, and in the meantime they carry and pass along to future generations a reassuring message that promises triumphal vindication at the expense of their historic enemies.

In the case of Shi’ites, the devotional and political dimensions of Mahdism are so interwoven as to be inseparable. A whole cosmology, with Husayn at the center as the saintly “sacrificial servant,” merges with meta-historical symbolism that transforms communal suffering to redemptive victory. As Abdulazziz Sachedina asserts in his classic study, *Islamic Messianism*:

*Raj’a* in the Imamite creed means the return of a group of believers to this world before the final resurrection occurs, during the days of al-Qa’im’s rule, or before or after that period. The *raj’a* will take place in order to show the believers the rule of the righteous Imam and to exact revenge from the enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*. The purpose of *raj’a* would also require that a given number of non-believers and enemies of *ahl al-bayt* [foremost among them being Yazid, the Umayyad caliph whose soldiers slaughtered Husayn and his forces at Karbala] also be returned to earth so that revenge may be exacted from them...In respect to the twelfth Imam, who is the Hidden Imam of the Imamites, it is his appearance or emergence (*zuhur*) which is awaited rather than his “return” (*raj’a*), as in the case of the other Imams or even the Prophet. The concept of *raj’a* when applied to the twelfth Imam refers to his function as the eschatological Imam...the delay in the appearance of the Imam, as al-Qa’im, the redresser of wrongs committed against the family of the Prophet, resulted in the accentuation of his function of al-Qa’im al-Mahdi of the Last Days.<sup>21</sup>

Sachedina underscores how essential Mahdism has been for the survival of Shi’ism in the face of repeated threats and persecutions:

The belief in the appearance of the Hidden Imam helped the Shi’ites to endure under unbearable situations and to hope for a just future pending the return of the Mahdi. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that without such a belief in the role of the twelfth Imam, the Imamite religion might not have been able to survive persecutions under different dynasties in the course of Islamic history, before it became established as the official creed of the Safavid empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The spiritual aspect of the Mahdi doctrine was destined to gain importance in the face of the failure to establish temporal rule by the Imam. Already the often quoted Shi’i tradition describing the temporal function of al-Qa’im al-Mahdi of “filling the earth with justice and equity as it is filled with tyranny and wickedness” sometimes assumed an esoteric interpretation. Sayyid Haydar al-Amuli (d. 1385), in explain[ing] this tradition says: “By ‘filling the earth with justice’ is meant that al-Qa’im al-Muntazar (the Awaited Qa’im) will fill the hearts with knowledge (and affirmation) of the Unity of God (*tawhid*), after they had been filled with polytheism and ignorance.” This

aspect of the Mahdi doctrine has become nothing less than the cornerstone of the Imamite spiritual edifice. It reflects the hopes and visions of its believers for a better existence.<sup>22</sup>

The vision of an ideal future community, fusing political authority with Islamic authenticity and integrity, has strengthened the faith of Shi'ites throughout centuries of persecution. Their faith was molded and tested in the crucible of history. Until recently that history proved to be tragic, often cruel. During the long period of the Greater Occultation, "the persistent faith in the *faraj* (freedom from grief) through the *zuhur* required Shi'ites to be on alert at all times and also to pave the way for the Imam's reappearance by constantly re-evaluating contemporary historical life." This stance of faithful anticipation and vigilance, despite physical hardships, is clearly a positive dimension of Shi'ite piety. The devotional loyalty to the Imams, sacrificial submission to a higher authority transcending temporal rulers, together with a flowering of the religious imagination which, in turn, fueled idealism and hope in ultimate redemption - all of these spiritual attributes can be seen as the blessed fruits of Shi'ite piety as it nourished the faithful over centuries. The idealism engendered by visionary Mahdism served to inspire moral self-criticism and repentance, since the belief in the prospect of redemption presumes a worthiness to be redeemed. As Sachedina notes:

Had it not been this deep sense of paving the way for the reappearance of the Imam, the Shi'ites would not have felt the need to re-evaluate their social circumstances and the shortcomings of their present lives. Thus, the *ghayba* of the Imam has acted as a creative force in the lives of the Imamites in order not only to help them bear with patience the difficult times, but also to prepare them to fulfill their historical responsibility of establishing true Islamic rule, even before the Imam assume the leadership of the Imamiyya.<sup>23</sup>

If, in Sachedina's view, the spiritual dimension of Mahdism predominated so long as the Imams failed to exercise temporal power, the question today is whether this spiritual focus has been eclipsed, undermined, or even corrupted by Shi'ite political ascendancy in Iran and elsewhere. Sachedina himself observes: "The chiliastic vision of history in Shi'ism continues to be expressed, even today, in terms of radical social protest in the face of political oppression." That expression may be a positive development, if the means to combat oppression are commensurate with just and noble ends. But what happens when the dark forces of hatred and revenge are mixed with this redemptive impulse?

## **The Mahdi Scouts in Lebanon: Exploiting Youthful Idealism**

One journalistic account of the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon offers disturbing food for thought. *The New York Times* of November 21, 2008, features a front-page article by Robert F. Worth entitled “Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young.” It is “the eighth in a series of articles examining the lives of the young across the Muslim world at a time of religious revival.”<sup>24</sup> In an era of rampant materialism, stark economic disparities, and disenchantment among young people everywhere, religious idealism and a return to traditional values can be laudable alternatives to apathy, alienation, and hopelessness. But the adolescents portrayed in Worth’s article are not being educated to feed the hungry, help the downtrodden, or educate the illiterate. They are being trained for military action against Israel, as part of the Lebanese Shi’ite movement’s long-range agenda.

“It’s like a complete system, from primary school to university,” said Talal Atrissi, a political analyst at Lebanese University who has been studying Hezbollah for decades. “The goal is to prepare a generation that has deep religious faith and is also close to Hezbollah.”

Much of this activity is fueled by a broader Shiite religious resurgence in Lebanon that began after the Iranian revolution in 1979. But Hezbollah has gone further than any other organization in mobilizing this force, both to build its own support base and to immunize Shiite youths from the temptations of Lebanon’s diverse and mostly secular society...

Hezbollah and its allies have...adapted and expanded religious rituals involving children, starting at ever-earlier ages. Women, who play a more prominent role in Hezbollah than they do in most other radical Islamic groups, are especially important in creating what is often called “the jihad atmosphere” among children.

The focus for much of Worth’s article is the Mahdi Scouts program that Hezbollah founded in 1985, soon after Hezbollah itself was created. Since that time, the scout network has grown to include some 60,000 children and leaders - six times larger than any of other 29 scout groups in Lebanon. They are also the most militaristic, serving as a training facility for Hezbollah’s armed forces. Worth gained access to some of the written materials used by the scout leaders to educate (or indoctrinate) their youthful charges. He writes:

Those books, copies of which were provided to this reporter by a Hezbollah official, show an extraordinary focus on religious themes and a full-time preoccupation with Hezbollah’s struggle against Israel. The chapter titles, for the 12- to 14-year-old age group, include “Love and Hate in God,” “Know Your Enemy,” “Loyalty to the Leader,” and “Facts About Jews.” Jews are described as cruel, corrupt, cowardly and deceitful, and they are called the killers of prophets. The chapter on Jews states that “their Talmud says those outside the Jewish religion are animals.”

Worth continues:

In every chapter, the children are required to write down or recite Koranic verses that illustrate the theme in question. They are taught to

venerate Ayatollah Khomeini - Iran has been a long-standing supporter of Hezbollah, providing it with money, weapons, and training - and the leaders of Hezbollah. They are told to hate Israel and to avoid people who are not devout. Questions at the end of chapters encourage the children to “watch your heart” and “assess your heart” to check wrong impulses and encourage virtuous ones. One note to the instructors reminds them that young scouts are in a sensitive phase of development that should be considered “a launching toward commitment.”

In his account of the Mahdi Scout program for girls, Worth describes a ritual called *Takleef Shara'ee*, or the holy responsibility, in which close to 300 girls, 8 to 9 years old, formally don the *hijab*, or Islamic head scarf. This ceremony has become more common in Lebanon in recent years, Worth notes, and it signals a deepening of religious faith and commitment on the part of these Shi'ite girls.

The two-and-a-half hour ceremony that followed - in which the girls performed a play about the meaning of the hijab and a bearded Hezbollah cleric delivered a long political speech - was a concentrated dose of Hezbollah ideology, seamlessly blending millenarian Shiite doctrine with furious diatribes against Israel.

Again and again, the girls were told that the hijab was an all-important emblem of Islamic virtue and that it was the secret power that allowed Hezbollah to liberate southern Lebanon [from Israeli military occupation]. The struggle with Israel, they were told, is the same as the struggle of Shiite Islam's founding figures, Ali and Hussein, against unjust rulers in their time.

As an Israeli Jew, but no less as a human being, I am dismayed by these demonizing projections onto my own people and the odious distortions of Jewish tradition. At the same time, I am aware that most Lebanese, including those I have met, have developed hostile views of Jews and Israel as a direct result of the suffering they have experienced during decades of war. Israeli airstrikes and military incursions into Lebanon, plus an eighteen-year occupation of the south ending in 2000, have served to strengthen Hezbollah and make it more appealing as the heroic resistance among Lebanese, especially Shi'ites who were, for many years, a disempowered community within that country. Hezbollah, the self-designated “Party of God,” very effectively uses the empowering symbolism of the *Mahdi*, with its promise of transforming suffering to victory. Suffering, including martyrdom, as well as eventual victory are both constitutive elements of Shi'ite piety and of the Shi'ite understanding of redemption. Moktada al-Sadr capitalizes on the same religious symbolism with his Mahdi Army in Iraq, following decades of oppression under Saddam Hussein and then confronting Western occupation forces.

Reading Worth's article and decrying the poisoning of young minds and hearts, I am painfully reminded of how Israeli Jewish youth in religious schools and youth movements are fed dehumanizing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, especially radical movements like Hezbollah and Hamas. Prolonged conflict between communities inevitably creates increasing radicalization, along with increasingly demonizing projections onto the

perceived enemy.<sup>25</sup> This is especially tragic when one sees tender-hearted, innocent, idealistic young people ideologically conditioned as part of their upbringing, sent by well-intentioned parents to paramilitary scout movements as preparation for the patriotic role of military service , which may entail the ultimate sacrifice of those precious young people.

The anti-Israel political ideology of Hezbollah interests me less, for the purposes of this study, than its warped interpretations of Islamic tradition, whose normative values emphasize mercy and compassion. When the Divine is invoked in prayer, *Allah* is referred to as *Al-Rahman Al-Raheem*, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful. In this account of the Mahdi Scouts, whatever mercy or compassion that may be evident is reserved for members of the Hezbollah constituency. This is a tragic reminder of how religion, any religion, is grotesquely distorted and contaminated by violent aspirations, when justice is confused with vengeance and when the legitimate struggle against oppression is corrupted by the demonizing of the perceived oppressor. Worth's troubling account also challenges us to reclaim the positive dimensions in the Islamic tradition concerning the *Mahdi*, the right-guided Redeemer chosen by God to lead humanity toward equity and justice.

### Iran after the 1979 Revolution

A central focus of our study is what happens to eschatological piety when a powerless and oppressed religious community suddenly assumes political power. For Jews, Israel is the contemporary laboratory that embodies this challenge. In the next section, we will examine how Jewish messianism has impacted Zionist ideology and Israeli policies. For Shi'ite Muslims, post-1979 Iran is the case study *par excellence*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the historian cited earlier, is a native Iranian who left Tehran for the United States following the Shah's downfall and the triumphant homecoming of Ayatollah Khomeini. He reflects on how these developments have begun to influence traditional Shi'ite notions about the Imamate and the *Mahdi*:

The Shi'ite Imam is...considered by Shi'ism as the only legitimate ruler of the Islamic community...Twelve-Imam Shi'ites therefore have rejected (until the Iranian Revolution of 1979) all existing political authority ever since the short-lived caliphate of 'Ali came to an abrupt end with his assassination. They believe that the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, is in occultation (*ghaybah*), that is, not outwardly present in this world and yet alive. All legitimate political power must derive from him, and he will appear one day to bring justice and peace to the world as part of eschatological events that will bring human history to a close. Since 1979 and the Iranian Revolution - as a result of which Shi'ite religious figures rule directly in Iran - new interpretations of the relation between religious and governmental authority have been made, but the significance and role of the hidden Imam remains [*sic*] unchanged.<sup>26</sup>

There have been different millennialist movements throughout Islamic history, often led by charismatic figures whose followers projected onto them the image and expectations of the eschatological *Mahdi*. Nasr notes that just before and during the spread of Western colonialism in the

nineteenth century, religio-political millennialist movements emerged in different parts of the Muslim world, from West Africa to India.<sup>27</sup>

He adds:

This wave gradually died out in the late thirteenth/nineteenth century, only to rise again during the past few decades following the political independence of Muslim nations without corresponding cultural independence. The very subjugation of Islam, despite outward political independence, which had raised many people's hopes, led to an atmosphere of expectation of Divine intervention in human history. This eschatological atmosphere, which characterizes Islamic millennialism, or Mahdism, was present during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. It was the determining factor in 1979 in the capture of the grand mosque in Mecca by a group of Saudis whose leader claimed to be the Mahdi. It also manifested itself in a strong Mahdist movement in northern Nigeria. Nor has this atmosphere of expectation of eschatological events associated with the coming of the Mahdi disappeared. On the contrary, it is one of the important aspects of the reality of Islam in the contemporary world, as it is of Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism...<sup>28</sup>

Seyyed Hossain Nasr's son, Vali Nasr, published a popular book of his own in 2006 entitled *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. In this historical survey of sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shi'as and their import for the future, the younger Nasr offers this reflection on recent developments in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq:

...Khomeini also relied on Shia messianism to confirm his own leadership of [the 1979] revolt. Unlike Sunnism, Shiism strongly cultivates millenarian expectations, which give the religion its framework for understanding history and current politics as well as the mysteries of salvation and the end time. The Iranian revolution drew on the power of that framework, but it was not unique in that regard. In Lebanon, the disappearance of the popular Shia leader Imam Musa al-Sadr in 1978 evoked tales of miraculous occultation. After the fall of Saddam in Iraq the firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr named his militia the Mahdi Army (Jaish al-Mahdi), clearly implying that his cause was that of the Twelfth Imam, and that those who fought him were the enemies of the promised Mahdi - who went into occultation over a millennium ago.<sup>29</sup>

Vali Nasr notes that during the Iranian revolution "Khomeini's followers used messianic symbols and language to give him an aura of power." He continues:

He assumed the title imam. To the Sunnis the title literally means "leader," as in those who lead prayers in a local mosque. For the Shia, by contrast, it is a much more evocative term, conjuring up images of Ali and his eleven descendants...In Iran, references to "Imam Khomeini" not only raised him above other ayatollahs but equated him with the saints. This became all the more the case as Khomeini's followers manipulated popular piety to enhance his religious standing...

Khomeini referred to the Shah's regime using terminology that had been reserved in religious texts for describing the enemies of the Twelfth Imam, such as taghut (false god) and mofsidin fi'l-arz (corrupters of the earth).



Many government officials were executed by the revolutionary regime on charges of fighting against the Twelfth Imam. After Khomeini assumed power, his titles became loftier still. He was referred to as Na'eb-e Imam (Deputy to the [Twelfth] Imam). On one occasion a parliamentary deputy asked him if he was the "promised Mahdi." Khomeini did not answer. Fearing that Khomeini had not heard, the MP repeated the question. Khomeini still did not answer, astutely neither claiming nor denying that he was the Twelfth Imam.<sup>30</sup>

In his account of the Iran-Iraq war, Vali Nasr deepens his analysis of how messianic piety was exploited to enhance motivation on the part of young, untrained, and ill-equipped Iranian fighters: "Many nights during the war, Iranian soldiers would wake up to see a white-shrouded figure on a white horse blessing them. These apparitions of the Twelfth Imam were professional actors sent to boost morale."<sup>31</sup>

The Shi'ite devotion to the martyred Imams, coupled with eschatological hope of redemption from suffering, engendered a self-sacrificial piety that enabled hundreds of thousands of Iranian young men and teenagers to drive the powerful Iraqi army from their homeland. The regime promised a place in heaven for anyone martyred in the fight against Saddam. Martyr's Cemetery in Tehran includes a gushing fountain with red water, symbolizing the blood of the dead. The epic struggle between the "sentinels of the Twelfth Imam" and the agents of evil created a fervor that, in Vali Nasr's eyes, "bred a cult of martyrdom in the populace and made sacrifice for the faith a central feature of revolutionary Shia politics."<sup>32</sup> This fervent devotion and willingness to die spread beyond the borders of Iran:

That cult of martyrdom proved equally important to Shia politics in Lebanon, where Hezbollah used it to launch its campaign of suicide bombing against the Israeli army in the 1980s. The willingness to die for the Shia cause was a watershed in Middle East politics. It gave Iran's revolutionary regime an edge in pursuing its domestic and international goals, and it made Islamic extremism and terrorism more lethal by encouraging what were in the 1980s called "martyrdom missions." In the Middle Eastern context at least (the Hindu Tamils of Sri Lanka have also extensively used suicide bombers), willingness to die for the cause has until fairly recently been seen as a predominantly Shia phenomenon, tied to the myths of Karbala and the Twelfth Imam.<sup>33</sup>

**Not everyone in Iran was pleased with these developments:**

Many in the religious establishment found these appeals to messianism disconcerting. Just as ultraorthodox Jews may oppose Zionism for presuming to do the messiah's special work, ultraconservative Shias were unhappy with Khomeini's messianic aura. Members of a powerful messianic society dedicated to the Twelfth Imam and named after him as the Hojjatieh were opposed to the Pahlavi monarchy and supported the goals of the revolution, but were uncomfortable with Khomeini's insinuation that he was or represented the Twelfth Imam. The Hojjatieh were disbanded after the revolution, but many members joined the revolutionary regime and some, like the current Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, became prominent figures in it. Reflecting Hojjatieh's dedication to the Twelfth



Imam but also seeking to recapture Khomeini's power over the masses, Ahmadinejad declared soon after he became president that the real ruler of Iran was the Twelfth Imam and that government policy should be guided by the goal of hastening his return. He even instructed his cabinet to sign a symbolic pledge of allegiance to the Twelfth Imam. Most Iranians were not eager to recognize Khomeini as the messiah, but messianism continued to have appeal in many circles.<sup>34</sup>

How influential is Mahdist belief and sentiment for the present Iranian leadership? The picture remains unclear, with reports of friction between President Ahmadinejad and the ruling Shi'ite clerics. Even if there are no charismatic leaders with the mass appeal of Ayatollah Khomeini, the mystique of the Twelfth Imam and the yearning for his return are powerful forces that may be used to justify irrational and irresponsible policies. Religious leaders in Iran have the serious burden of channeling popular yearnings for redemption in a constructive direction that squares with the fundamental Islamic values of justice and compassion.

### **Jewish Messianism, Zionism, and Israel**

To put our analysis of Shi'ite piety and politics in comparative perspective, it is instructive to look at how Jewish messianism has influenced, and has been influenced by, the establishment of the state of Israel and the aftermath of the Six-Day War of June, 1967. A detailed treatment of this subject is not possible here, but some historical, spiritual, and political ideas can be extracted and examined.

A cogent overview of Jewish messianism is Gershom Scholem's essay "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism."<sup>35</sup> Scholem's primary aim in this reflection is to explore "the special tensions in the Messianic idea and their understanding in Rabbinic Judaism." At the outset he identifies three primary forces in the Rabbinic tradition: conservative, restorative, and utopian. The normative tradition developed by legal scholars, he argues, reflects the conservative tendency, especially as the people struggled to survive under conditions of exile, including marginalized status and political powerlessness in Christian and Muslim societies. As a spiritual counterpoint, Scholem sees Jewish messianism as a combination of the restorative and utopian impulses, combining an idealized memory of past glories (e.g., the Exodus and the Davidic Kingdom) with anticipation of restored glory in a redeemed future (a Messianic Kingdom). The origins of the messianic idea are in the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophetic visions of an End of Days (*acharit hayamim*), as in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4.

To be sure, the predictions of the [Hebrew] prophets do not yet give us any kind of well-defined conception of Messianism. Rather we have a variety of different motifs in which the much emphasized utopian impulse - the vision of a better humanity at the End of Days - is interpenetrated with restorative impulses like the reinstatement of an ideally conceived Davidic kingdom.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout Jewish history, beginning in the Talmud<sup>37</sup>, there have been arguments over whether the messianic era would come suddenly in an apocalyptic upheaval or slowly through an evolutionary process of human

betterment. For Scholem, the messianic idea, at least in its most intense or “acute” form, is strongly linked to apocalypticism, a historical orientation different from the idealism in Isaiah or Micah or Amos.<sup>38</sup> For these biblical prophets, as for the rationalist Maimonides in the Middle Ages, history will be messianically transformed through Divine agency as a consequence of God’s covenantal faithfulness toward humanity, and toward the Jewish people in particular. Repentance by human beings may hasten the process, but it is inherently part of God’s plan for the Creation.

Jewish apocalypticism, by contrast, sees this world as a battleground between the forces of darkness and light, with the ultimate triumph of light realized through a cosmic upheaval. In both eschatological scenarios, the Jewish people will be restored from exile to the Land of Israel, with a messianic ruler based in Jerusalem heading a global government. For the apocalypticists, this historic transformation will be brought about through cataclysmic battles, with many casualties. A more peaceful messianic vision was expressed by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi in Palestine under the British Mandate from 1921 until his death in 1935:

*The brotherly love of Esau and Jacob [Christians and Jews in Rabbinic mythic typology], of Isaac and Ishmael [Jews and Muslims], will assert itself above all the confusion that the evil brought on by our bodily nature has engendered. It will overcome them and transform them to eternal light and compassion. This broad concept, sweetened by the enlightenment of the true teaching of the Torah, must be our guide on all our ways in the end of days, to seal our understanding of the Torah with the imprint of the Messiah by turning the bitter to sweet, and darkness to light.*<sup>39</sup>

Maimonides argued against supernatural messianism<sup>40</sup> because he knew that it lent itself to zealous and dangerous extremes. Jewish history has confirmed his apprehensions. The zealots who fought against Rome in 66-70 C.E. and invited the destruction of the Second Temple, the warriors of Bar Kokhba (who was considered the Messiah by no less an authority than Rabbi Akiva) who fought the same Roman Empire some sixty years later, and the followers of the false messiah Shabbatai Tzvi (who ended up converting to Islam under threat of execution) in 1665 and later - all of these messianists were devout Jews who fervently believed in the imminent inauguration of a radically new era of history. Like faithful Shi’ites, they were strengthened by a deep trust in God’s transcendent power to reverse an existential condition of communal degradation. And like faithful Shi’ites, that trust led them to embrace causes that seemed futile, even unto martyrdom. The common denominator is a readiness to live in two realities simultaneously: actual history with its political impotence, painful tragedies, and incessant struggles; and messianic meta-history with its Divine promise of political empowerment, redemptive healing, and spiritual fulfillment. The

profound tension of this paradoxical existence, with its latent power and creativity, is captured in this passage from Scholem's essay:

The magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds to the endless powerlessness in Jewish history during all the centuries of exile, when it was unprepared to come forward onto the plan of world history. There's something preliminary, something provisional about Jewish history; hence its inability to give of itself entirely. For the Messianic idea is not only consolation and hope. Every attempt to realize it tears open the abysses which lead each of its manifestations ad absurdum. There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. It diminishes the singular worth of the individual, and he can never fulfill himself, because the incompleteness of his endeavors eliminates precisely what constitutes its highest value. This in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled a life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished. One may say, perhaps, the Messianic idea is the real anti-existentialist idea. Precisely understood, there is nothing concrete which can be accomplished by the unredeemed. This makes for the greatness of Messianism, but also for its constitutional weakness.<sup>41</sup>

Is 20th-century Zionism, which gave birth to a Jewish state in the aftermath of the greatest tragedy ever to befall the Jewish people, a response to this unrealistic "life lived in deferment"? To Scholem it is, but also in a Jewishly paradoxical way:

Little wonder that overtones of Messianism have accompanied the modern Jewish readiness for irrevocable action in the concrete realm when it set out on the utopian return to Zion. It is a readiness which no longer allows itself to be fed on hopes. Born out of the horror and destruction that was Jewish history in our generation, it is bound to history itself and not to meta-history... Whether or not Jewish history will be able to endure this entry into the concrete realm without perishing in the crisis of the Messianic claim which has virtually been conjured up - that is the question which out of his great and dangerous past the Jew of this age poses to his present and to his future.<sup>42</sup>

Just eight years after Scholem delivered the lecture which formed the basis for this essay, history took a swift and ambivalent turn - can one say paradoxical? In June, 1967, the state of Israel - founded on a combination of prophetic promise, messianic hope, and political realism, as exemplified by Ben Gurion and his generation of Zionist leaders - underwent a radical transformation. Facing a perceived threat to its existence in the rhetoric and policies of Egyptian President Nasser, the leaders of Israel opted for war to safeguard its security and enhance the prospects for lasting peace. They hoped to trade the territories conquered in those six days of fighting for peace treaties with the neighboring Arab countries. But Jewish messianists from the ranks of religious Zionism perceived the new situation differently. They interpreted as miraculous and Divinely ordained the swift military victory which left Israel in control of four times more land than it ruled before the war, including holy sites in East Jerusalem, Hebron/Al-Khalil, Shechem/Nablus, and elsewhere. The seeds of the settlement movement

known as *Gush Emunim* (the “Bloc of the Faithful”) were sown; and as the settlement enterprise grew, so did the power of the militant messianism that accompanied it. Some extremist fringe groups embraced an apocalyptic ideology that anticipates an all-out war with the Muslim world, ending in victory and vindication for their self-referencing agenda. A small religious Zionist peace movement, *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom*, has joined forces with the largely secular Israeli peace camp to decry the settlers’ religious ideology as dangerous pseudo-messianism, combining absolutist thinking with an uncritical intoxication with power.<sup>43</sup> Out of this dovish religious constituency emerged the *Meimad* Party, led by Knesset Member Rabbi Michael Melchior. *Meimad* was allied with the Labor Party until the present election season, when it joined forces with the Greens. The religious peace movement has attracted only modest support over the past thirty years, while *Gush Emunim* drew hundreds of thousands of followers, including many Jews who are not religiously observant but who found this militant messianism appealing for various reasons, including its nationalistic fervor and its heroic-sounding rhetoric that echoed the idealism of the early Zionist pioneers. More significantly, the settlers found many supporters in government circles, including among the secular Labor and Likud parties. Until the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 (engineered ironically by Ariel Sharon, who had been the settlers’ major political patron), the territorialist vision of redemption promulgated by *Gush Emunim* was largely unchecked. Characterized by a religiously-grounded historical determinism, it saw Jewish rule over the whole of Greater Israel as a messianic imperative, sanctioned by God and overruling any Palestinian national claims.<sup>44</sup> The dangers latent in this religious chauvinism became apparent to many Israelis only when Jewish terrorists emerged from the ranks of the settlers and their supporters, including the assassin of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

One could argue that there were always tensions in Zionist ideology and practice between ethnocentrism or chauvinism, on the one hand, and humanism or socialism on the other. As early as 1922, Ahad Ha’am<sup>45</sup>, responding to reports of Jewish counter-terrorism against Arabs, wrote: “If that is the ‘messiah,’ may he not come in my time.”

For him, it was a moral and spiritual contradiction for the return to Zion to be realized through the shedding of innocent blood.<sup>46</sup>

While these internal tensions coexisted from the beginning of the Zionist movement, it was only after the Six-Day War and the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (along with the Sinai, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem), that the messianic impulse latent in the Jewish homecoming project came to the fore. And as we saw with Shi’ite Mahdism, there is a particularist and a universalist dimension to Jewish messianism. On the one hand, Jewish empowerment and territorial control reverses a condition of exile, historical marginalization, and vulnerability. (One should add that decades of Arab/Muslim hostility to Zionism, from well before 1967, contributed to the nationalistic myopia that too often characterizes Israeli perceptions and consciousness). At the same time, a messianic era of global peace has traditionally been envisioned as accompanying the Jewish

restoration to Zion.<sup>47</sup> For the *Gush Emunim* settlers, the particularist aspect of Jewish messianism trumped the universalist vision of world peace, generating a religious ideology that I would call “territorialotry.” Such a worldview elevates control of the land above moral imperatives like inclusive justice and peaceful coexistence. Land becomes holier than human life in such a skewed “hierarchy of holiness,” and the practical result is to turn Jewish Israelis into oppressive occupiers of another people’s land. In the settlers’ mythical understanding of history and geography, the West Bank is referred to by the biblical names Judea and Samaria. The occupied territories are viewed as messianically liberated or redeemed, part of the Jewish people’s Divinely granted birthright. The settler lexicon included, at least until recently, an acronym formed from the first letters of the Hebrew terms for “Judea, Samaria, and Gaza”: *Yeshu’a*, connoting redemption.<sup>48</sup>

Historian David Biale, in his provocative study *Power and Powerless in Jewish History*, situates the *Gush Emunim* movement within the wider context of Jewish messianism:

Gush bases its Zionism on a nationalist interpretation of traditional Judaism. Zionism is the fulfillment of biblical promises, a theme that had always been present in Zionist ideology, but not with the same degree of Orthodox conviction. In this religious-nationalist hybrid, Zionism becomes the realization of traditional messianism rather than a revolution against tradition, and the religion of Judaism is turned into a political ideology.

Although the activist messianism of Gush Emunim departs from the more cautious nationalism of older religious Zionists, it represents the logical culmination of the tradition of political messianism discussed [earlier in Biale’s book and alluded to in our own discussion of Scholem’s essay]. This type of messianism, originating in the Talmud but articulated most cogently by Maimonides in the twelfth century, claimed that human action can precipitate the coming of the Messiah. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of Orthodox authorities developed this doctrine further. The circle around the Vilna Gaon argued that a Messiah son of Joseph (a figure mentioned in the Talmud) would reestablish the Jewish community in the Land of Israel and prepare the ground for the coming of the Messiah son of David. They considered this first Messiah to be a military leader and associated him with the war of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38-39). Some of these messianists emigrated from Lithuania to Palestine, where they were involved in a millenarian movement around the year 1840. At about the same time, Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, an important Polish rabbi, called for the renewal of some of the ancient [Temple] sacrifices in Jerusalem as a prelude to the coming of the Messiah.

All these ideas belong much more to the history of Jewish messianism than they do the prehistory of political Zionism, but they were to have an important impact on religious Zionists in the twentieth century. Rabbinical authorities such as Abraham Isaac Kook, the chief rabbi of Palestine from 1921 to 1935, and Menachem Kasher, a noted Israeli Talmudic scholar, revived this tradition by interpreting the Zionist settlement in Palestine as a fulfillment of messianic theory. Kook held that the secular pioneers unwittingly served God’s messianic plan by settling the land and that after

they accomplished their mission, the Orthodox would inherit political power. Kasher argued that the Six Day War (and, later, the Yom Kippur War) was the War of Gog and Magog prophesied in the Bible. The Gush itself, which regards Kook and Kasher as its foremost teachers, relies heavily on the messianic tradition that these authorities have emphasized. It sees the wars of Israel as messianic wars and the politics of the state of Israel as preparations for the coming of the Messiah.<sup>49</sup>

The dangers in such an interpretation of history are easily apparent. Imposing a mystical messianism on ordinary events in a self-serving manner easily engenders an ends-justify-the-means group ethic that condones injustices against others for the greater “messianic” good. As with Shi’ites in Iran and Lebanon, we see that when a historically oppressed community - in this case the Jews - assumes political power, it can couch its self-interested claims and policies in “messianic” rhetoric. The ideology created can make compensation or retaliation for past victimhood into a “redemptive” agenda that ends up victimizing others.



## Conclusion: Is Shi'ite-Jewish Solidarity Possible?

We have seen how end-time scenarios can motivate the faithful to self-referencing idealism and acts of heroic self-sacrifice, including martyrdom. We have also acknowledged the toll in human suffering that too often accompanies this chauvinistic interpretation of religion. Narrow conceptions of holiness in history or of God's redemptive plan for humanity are invoked by militants to justify hatred and violence. So we return to the questions posed at the outset of this essay: In the face of these challenges, how can Shi'ite Muslims and religious Jews prevent the misuse of their respective eschatologies? How can they counter the actions of coreligionists who invoke these traditions in the service of self-serving political aims? And might Shi'ites and Jews who are dismayed by this kind of spiritual corruption join forces to redeem their sacred traditions from the would-be "redeemers"? The last question is posed mainly because, in contemporary Middle East politics, Iranian leaders and Hezbollah representatives tend to demonize Israel, while many Jewish Israelis project demonic stereotypes onto these Shi'ite adversaries in return. Can alternative spiritual wisdom be tapped to combat the forces of hatred and revenge acting in the name of the *Mahdi* or the Messiah?

Learning about each other's faith traditions is one essential and urgent requirement. Religious educators and media professionals need to help educate the wider publics about the people and tradition being negatively caricatured. If they would sponsor honest explorations of the positive and negative elements in each community's religious heritage, such pro-active leadership would help reduce the mutual demonization. Unbiased studies might find commonalities that could become bridges to greater understanding, even solidarity; for example, how historic suffering was endured through steadfast faithfulness and eschatological hope. Mutual appreciation might then replace mutual denigration.

Ultimately, both communities need to undergo a process of self-criticism that elicits repentance, one of the highest virtues in both traditions and a capacity inherent in the human conscience.<sup>50</sup> Evoking this innate capacity for repentance - *tawba* in Arabic, *teshuvah* in Hebrew - requires strong and courageous spiritual leadership. Recognized religious authorities need to commit themselves to this process of mutual healing, so that past trauma does not become an excuse for future violence. For these leaders to take on this daunting task, given the majority sentiments in their religious communities, they need to meet each other (initially, perhaps, under trusted third-party sponsorship), to become friends and allies, and then to demonstrate to their coreligionists that faith and spirituality can be forces for peace and not only fuel for continued enmity. In this way, the destructive misuses of our respective eschatologies can be countered by alternative Mahdist and Messianic visions. It is my hope that this essay can contribute towards a religious peacebuilding agenda based on more inclusive, just, and nonviolent understandings of messianic fulfillment.



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## Notes

1 See R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. Other resources on this subject include Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002; Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name: Religion in an Age of Conflict*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003; Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; Jack Nelson - Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003; and Ian Markham and Ibrahim M. Abu - Rabi', eds., *September 11: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002.

2 W. Madelung, "Al - Mahdi," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Danzel, B. Lewis, and Ch. Pellat, eds., Vol. V, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986, pp. 1230 - 1. Mu'awiya was the founder of the Umayyad dynasty and ruled as caliph from 661 to 680 C.E.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 1235.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 1233.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 1235.

7 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr trans. and ed., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975, pp. 210 - 211. Italics are absent from this original text, but are included here on the basis of selections from the book reproduced in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, eds., *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 8 - 11.

8 Tabataba'i, *op cit.*, p. 214

9 Cf. Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam*, Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1993: "A group of supporters of Ja'far [al - Sadiq, the sixth Imam] in the late third/ninth century maintained that he was the *qa'im*, a concept which by then had become equivalent to the concept of *mahdi*. (p. 86).

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 90 - 91.

11 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001, pp. 11 - 12.

12 Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005, pp. 147, 149.

13 Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978, p. 217.

14 One fascinating tradition identifies the mother of the Twelfth Imam/Mahdi as a Christian slave girl named Narjis - according to some the granddaughter of a Byzantine emperor - who was captured during a Muslim battle against the Byzantines and then married to the eleventh Imam, Hasan al - 'Askari. This aspect of Mahdism parallels the Jewish and Christian genealogical tradition in which "foreign" women were maternal ancestors of King David and the Royal Messiah, identified in Christianity as Jesus. Cf. Ayoub, *ibid.*, pp. 219 - 220.

15 Ayoub, *ibid.*, pp. 217 - 218.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 218 - 219.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 223 - 224.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Abdulazziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981, pp. 167 - 168. Sachedina's comprehensive study includes explanations of how Jesus and the *Mahdi* will

together usher in the Redemption, with Jesus returning to fight and kill the evil *Dajjal* (“the Antichrist of Islamic eschatology”), to unite all the Peoples of the Book into one *umma*, and to establish a rule of justice before he dies and is buried in Medina alongside Muhammad. (pp. 171 - 172).

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 181 - 182.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 182 - 183.

24 Robert F. Worth, “Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2008, accessible at [www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html)

25 The Irish poet George William Russell (pen name “a.e.”) observed: “By intensity of hatred nations create in themselves the characters they imagine in their enemies. Hence it is that all passionate conflicts result in the interchange of characteristics.”

26 Nasr, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 - 13.

27 Cf. Nasr’s accounts of various millennialist movements in Sudan, West Africa, North Africa, Persia, and modern - day Pakistan (*ibid.*, pp. 74, 139 - 141, 177 - 178).

28 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

29 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 130.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 130 - 131.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 132 - 133.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

34 *Ibid.*

35 The first chapter of Scholem’s book *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York: Schocken Books, 1971, pp. 1 - 36. It was originally delivered in German at an Eranos Conference in 1959.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 5

37 See, for example, the *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 98a.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

39 From a letter written in 1908/5678, in *Abraham Isaac Kook - The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters and Poems*, trans. and introduction by Ben Zion Bokser, New York: Paulist Press, 1978, p. 339.

40 Cf. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Melachim u’Milchamoteihem/The Laws of Kings and Their Wars*, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, trans., New York/Jerusalem: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1987, chapters 11 and 12, pp. 222 - 253.

41 Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 35 - 36.

43 *Oz veShalom* was founded in 1975 as a response to *Gush Emunim*; *Netivot Shalom* emerged in 1982 in reaction to the Lebanon War that year. The combined movement’s name means “Strength and Peace” - “Paths of Peace,” from verses in Psalms and Proverbs respectively. I was its executive director during the 1980’s. English - language materials are available at P.O.Box 4433, Jerusalem, Israel 91043. Information in English and Hebrew can be found online at [www.netivot-shalom.org.il](http://www.netivot-shalom.org.il) See, also, the essay by Uriel Simon, one of the movement’s leaders, entitled “Territory and Morality from a Religious Zionist Perspective,” in David Burrell and Yehezkel Landau, eds., *Voices from Jerusalem: Jews and Christians Reflect on the Holy Land*, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992, pp. 107 - 117.

44 Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, son of Abraham Isaac Kook and spiritual mentor of *Gush Emunim*, claimed that holding onto the territories acquired in the Six - Day War was a fundamental religious imperative and nonnegotiable, comparable to the three cardinal commandments which a Jew must never violate - murder, idolatry, and forbidden sexual relations - even at the cost of one’s own life. This *halakhic* (Rabbinic legal) ruling was compounded by a messianic determinism that affirmed Jewish/Israeli control, and eventual sovereignty, over Judea, Samaria, and Gaza as Divinely sanctioned. For a critical analysis of *Gush Emunim*’s messianic determinism and the religious counter - vision of *Oz veShalom - Netivot Shalom*, see Uriel Tal, “Historical and Metahistorical Self - Views in

Religious Zionism,” included in the anthology *Self - Views in Historical Perspective in Egypt and Israel*, Shimon Shamir ed., Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, n.d., and reprinted in *Religious Zionism: Challenges and Choices*, Yehezkel Landau ed., Jerusalem: Oz veShalom Publications, 1980, pp. 5 - 15.

45 Pen name of the writer Asher Ginsberg (1856 - 1927), the leader of “Cultural Zionism” who opposed the goal of Jewish statehood. He was raised in a pious Hasidic family but became a secularist and a spiritually committed humanist.

46 Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994, p.602.

47 This was part of the religious Zionist vision expressed by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (see fn. 39). Rabbi Kook went so far as to assert: “It is not fitting for Jacob [that is, the people of Israel] to engage in political life at a time when statehood requires bloody ruthlessness and demands a talent for evil.” (Telushkin, *ibid.*, p. 603). Kook died in 1935 and so did not live to see the horrors of the Holocaust. Would he have retained his purist ideals had he lived another ten years?

48 For an extensive analysis of *Gush Emunim*’s messianic Zionism as well as ultra - Orthodox (*haredi*)

anti - Zionism, see Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman, trans., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

49 David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, New York: Schocken Books, 1986, pp. 166 - 167.

50 See Amitai Etzioni and David E. Carney, eds., *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. This multifaith resource on repentance and reconciliation features essays by Mahmoud Ayoub (Islam), Jacob Neusner (Judaism), and Harvey Cox (Christianity).

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