

Geulas Yisrael #114

Shoftim: The Biggest Ir Miklat in History

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

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

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

וְשָׁב יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־שְׁבוֹתֶיךָ וְרַחֲמֶיךָ וְשָׁב וְקִבְּצֶךָ מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְצִיךָ יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהֶיךָ
שָׁמָּה

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

אֲרָאֲנֹו וְלֹא עֲתָה אֲשׁוּרְנֹו וְלֹא קִרְוֹב דְּרֹךְ כּוֹכָב מִיַּעֲקֹוב וְקָם שִׁבְט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וּמַחֲץ פְּאֲתַי מוֹאָב
וְקִרְקַר כָּל־בְּנֵי־נֶשֶׁת :

Each of these verses portray essential Messianic events such as the ingathering of Jewish exiles and the conquest of hostile nations. Each of these verses is a suitable carrier for Messianic codes.

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

וְאִם־יִרְחִיב יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־גְּבֻלְךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם וְנָתַן לְךָ אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר
לְתַת לְאַבְרָהָם...וְיִסְפַּתְּ לָךְ עוֹד שְׁלֹשׁ עָרִים עַל הַשְּׁלֹשׁ הָאֵלֶּה

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

Though territorial expansion is pivotal to the Messianic era, the concept of ir miklat itself, appears unrelated. Why did the Torah encode Messianic promises within the halacha of ir miklat? How does the twinning between Moshiach and ir miklat alter our Messianic perspective?

Moshiach and Halacha

Unlike the first two pesukim which portray historical events, this third pasuk contains a mitzvah. As the borders of Messianic Israel expand, we are halachikally obligated to install three additional cities of refuge. By tethering a Messianic promise to a halachik mandate, the Torah confirms the inevitability of Moshiach. Halacha is eternal, and, by association, so is the arrival of Moshiach. Each and every halacha instructed by Hashem, must, by definition, have applicability. It is theologically impossible for a halacha to never come to fruition. Streaming Messianic predictions through halacha and not just through historical events, more firmly proves the certainty of Moshiach. If the arrival of Moshiach is associated with a halacha, it too must be inevitable.

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

Will the Messianic era be utopian?

Binding a Messianic prediction to the halacha of ir miklat raises a different, but intriguing question. Will the Messianic era introduce a perfect world? In a utopian world without murder, the function of arei miklat becomes obsolete. Arei miklat

cities, provide safe-haven for unintentional murderers, protecting them against revenge killings by relatives of the victim. In a perfect world without violence, no unintentional murder occurs, and arei miklat, presumably, go extinct. Instead of adding three additional cities during the era of Moshiach, we should be dismantling the original six!

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

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

Heightened Moral Sensitivity

Not only will cities of refuge continue to function, but three additional locations will be launched. Incrementing arei miklat symbolizes a heightened moral environment. Typically, an ir miklat served three different functions: it protected the unintentional murdered from reprisal and, secondly, provided atonement for his crime. Beyond a safe-haven and a partial atonement, life in an ir miklat also reformed a person whose carelessness led to murder. Arei miklat were inhabited by Levi'im who had dedicated their own lives to higher religious purposes. Ideally, living amongst Levi'im transformed the careless murderer, inspiring higher moral sensibility and greater respect for human life. An ir miklat wasn't just a prison or a refuge but a center for moral rehabilitation. Incrementing these centers in the Messianic era wasn't merely a pragmatic step, due to expanded borders. It was symbolic of a world of more acute moral sensitivity and of heightened respect for human life. Designating additional arei miklat broadcasts a world of deeper respect for the divine gift of human life.

The Ir Miklat of History

Finally, by encoding the promise of Moshiach within the halacha of ir miklat, the Torah also provides a map or a timeline for the arrival of Moshiach. Our modern return to Israel has aroused broad ideological beliefs and ambitious Messianic assertions. For many, the restoration of Jewish sovereignty, the ingathering of exiles to our ancient homeland are some of the many signs that our long-awaited process of redemption had gradually begun. Yet, Messianic events are shrouded in mystery and draped in confusion, often leaving us with little other than conjecture. Sadly, our sovereignty isn't complete or ideal, and the ingathering of exiles is still unfinished. We see these as unfinished redemptive "starts" but they come with serious question marks.

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

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

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