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Messianism and Political Action: How Utopianism and Nationalism Merge in Contemporary Shi'ite and Jewish Political Theologies

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Abstract / Résumé / Resumen

This paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding the political implications of messianism in both Judaism and Islam, with a focus on Shi'ism. Through a comparative study of the concepts of Jewish Messianism and Shi'ite Mahdism, two major common trends are recognized in both theologies: The first trend is Passive messianism, which disapproves any political action by the believers to hasten the final redemption. For centuries, this perspective was and still is accepted by the mainstream of Jewish and Shi'ite traditionalist and orthodox scholars. The second trend, on the contrary, is called Active messianism – a rather contemporary innovation in Jewish and Shi'ite orthodoxies – which not only finds itself at ease with messianic-oriented political action, but it actually prescribes it as a necessity and a religious task for believers in order to prepare the ground for the coming of the Redeemer. The thesis of this paper is that active messianism, despite proclaiming a universal cause for redemption, has paradoxically embraced nationalism, and it has effectively reinforced and reproduced the idea of nation-state, within both Judaism and Islam. The paper seeks possible reasons for such an unusual marriage of messianism and nationalism, and it concludes that the minority status of both Jewish and Shi'ite people and their long history of suffering and vulnerability can be an explanation for this interesting phenomenon. The paper also recognizes that there is an evolution from more moderate toward more radical messianic nationalism in both Judaism and Shi'ism. While the former only seeks early preparations for final redemption to occur in an unforeseeable future time, the latter is so impatient as to even force the end by blowing into an extremist and xenophobic nationalism.

Cet article fournit un cadre conceptuel pour comprendre les implications politiques du messianisme dans le judaïsme et l'islam, en particulier dans le chiisme. Grâce à une étude comparative des conceptions du messianisme juif et du mahdisme chiite on reconnaît deux tendances communes dans les deux théologies : la première est le messianisme passif, qui rejette toute action politique des croyants qui cherchent à accélérer la rédemption finale. Pendant des siècles, cette perspective a été et est encore acceptée par le courant principal du traditionalisme juif et chiite ainsi que par les universitaires orthodoxes. En revanche, la deuxième tendance est le messianisme actif – une innovation plus contemporaine des orthodoxies juive et chiite – qui non seulement se

trouve à l'aise dans l'action politique orientée vers le messianisme, mais établit aussi celle-ci comme une nécessité et une obligation religieuse des croyants, afin de préparer le terrain pour la venue du Rédempteur. La thèse de cet essai est que le messianisme actif, en dépit de sa proclamation d'une cause universelle de rédemption, a embrassé paradoxalement le nationalisme et a reproduit et renforcé l'idée de l'État-nation au sein du judaïsme et de l'islam. Cet article explore les raisons possibles de ce mariage inhabituel entre le messianisme et le nationalisme et conclut que le statut minoritaire des Juifs et des Chiites et leur longue histoire de souffrance et de vulnérabilité pourrait être une explication à ce phénomène si intéressant. Il reconnaît également que dans le judaïsme et dans le chiisme il y a une évolution du nationalisme messianique vers un autre plus radical. Alors que le premier ne recherche que les premiers préparatifs pour la rédemption finale qui aura lieu dans un avenir prévisible, le second est si désireux de forcer la fin qu'il a même préconisé un nationalisme extrême et xénophobe.

Este artículo ofrece un marco conceptual para la comprensión de las implicaciones políticas del mesianismo en el judaísmo y el islam, con una visión particular del chiismo. Mediante un estudio comparativo de los conceptos del mesianismo judío y el mahdismo chií, se reconocen dos grandes tendencias comunes en ambas teologías: la primera es el mesianismo pasivo, que reprueba cualquier acción política de los creyentes que pretenda acelerar la redención final. Durante siglos, esta perspectiva fue y sigue siendo aceptada por la corriente principal del tradicionalismo judío y chií y por los académicos ortodoxos. Por el contrario, la segunda tendencia, es el mesianismo activo –una innovación más contemporánea en las ortodoxias judía y chií–, que no sólo se encuentra a sus anchas en la acción política orientada al mesianismo, sino que establece ésta como una necesidad y una obligación religiosa para los creyentes, con vistas a preparar el terreno para la venida del Redentor. La tesis de este ensayo es que el mesianismo activo, a pesar de que proclama una causa universal de redención, ha abrazado paradójicamente el nacionalismo y ha reforzado y reproducido la idea del Estado-nación en el interior del judaísmo y del islam. Este artículo indaga las posibles razones de este tipo de matrimonio inusual entre el mesianismo y el nacionalismo y concluye que la condición minoritaria de los judíos y los chiís y su larga historia de sufrimiento y vulnerabilidad pueden ser una explicación de este interesante fenómeno. También reconoce que tanto en el judaísmo como en el chiismo se observa una evolución desde un

nacionalismo mesiánico moderado hacia otro más radical. Mientras que el primero sólo busca los preparativos iniciales para la redención final que tendrá lugar en un futuro previsible, el segundo es tan impaciente que incluso fuerza el final y preconiza un nacionalismo extremista y xenófobo.

Key Words / Mots-clés / Palabras clave

Active messianism; messianic nationalism; religious Zionism; political Islam.

Messianisme active; nationalisme méssianique; sionisme religieux; Islam politique.

Mesianismo activo; nacionalismo mesiánico; sionismo religioso; Islam político.

In the first glance, the terms messianism and nationalism simply sound incompatible. Messianism by nature contains elements of universality, whereas nationalism is defined in the particular borders of nation-state. This paper is an exercise in comparative political theology, examining two different eschatological traditions with their hopes and envisioned scenarios for redemption. As Yehezkel Landau points out, “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 (Landau, 2009)”.

The purpose of this research is to study the concept of messianism and its relation with nationalism within Shi’ite revolutionary Islam and Jewish religious Zionism. 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 Jewish religion is a religion of legal, societal, and national dimensions. It is a religion of law (*halakhah*), in that it concentrates on its adherents’ way of life and takes a greater interest in their tangible actions than in their declaration of faith. It is a social religion, in that it deals with communal values and seeks to shape the public domain, sometimes even before getting involved with the private. And it is a national religion, in that most of its commandments and directives pertain to a particular people, the congregation of Israel, and only a few are directed toward humanity per se. Taken together, these elements afford the Jewish religious tradition a definite political character. Consequently, as the contemporary Jewish philosopher Aviezer Ravitzky points out, such a religio-political tradition can never be indifferent with respect to a state that it regards as the state of the Jewish people. It will strive mightily to influence that state’s laws and values and to impose its imprint on its culture and symbols (Ravitzky, 2006).

The same argument can be made with regard to Shi’ism, though with a few reservations. Like Judaism, Islam (including Shi’ite and Sunni branches alike) is a religion of law (*shari’a*) and it is also a societal religion, with a special attention to the social aspects of life. The only difference comes with the third factor: nationalism. Islam is definitely not a “national” religion in its message and mandate. It has obvious universal claims and it is supposed to be addressed to all human beings in all times. However, Shi’ism is a branch of Islam which might find itself more at ease with the “nation-state.” It is because of the minority and exceptionalist position of Shi’ism within the Muslim world that it can be somehow regarded as a “national” religion, especially in the case of Iran (Richard, 1981). Iran is the most populated Shi’ite country in the world, with an absolute majority of Shi’ite Muslims. There is a long history behind how Iranians adopted Shi’ism as their favorite version of Islam.

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed historical review on how Shi’ism became Iran’s state

religion in the 16th century in contrast to the Sunni Ottoman Turks as the main hegemonic rival for the Safavid Empire – the first Iranian dynasty since the Muslim conquest of Persia. What is certainly worth mentioning here is that Shi'ism gradually turned into an Iranian national religion, in which Iranians could find their own destiny and identity. The mythical image of the Shi'ite Imams as righteous and pure people, with tragic fates, perfectly matched the feelings of a proud Iranian nation. These claims focused on the perpetual and historical suffering of the Iranians, who were the victims of several foreign invasions. Moreover, the Iranians always believed that their share in building the Islamic civilization was greater than the other Muslim nations, and therefore, they deserved to be appreciated more than under the Arab rulers. Shi'ism also provided a suitable ground for the reinforcement of this sense of Iranian “exceptionalism” within the Muslim world. The unique role of Shi'ism, as an inspiration and fuel for the Iranian nationalistic cause, has evolved over the centuries into a powerful political institution¹.

Some of the main questions to be addressed in this paper include: What are the similarities between Jewish and Shi'ite perspectives towards messianism? And how messianism and nationalism have been combined in contemporary Jewish and Shi'ite religious schools of thought over the past century?

In the next few pages, I will try to answer to each of these questions in detail. But before talking about similarities, it would be necessary to clarify what are not similar between Jewish and Shi'ite perspectives of nation-state. For Judaism, two factors are the most important with this regard: Land, and Exile. Jewish nationalism was first and foremost aimed to put an end to Jewish Diaspora all over the world, and to gather Jews in a national home, where they would be immune of any further persecutions at the hands of the gentiles. Although at the beginning of the Jewish nationalist movement the location of such a national home was of no particular importance, Zionism later focused on Palestine – the sacred “Promised Land” for all Jews. As we will see, this emphasis on the Land of Israel could not be divorced from the influence of religious symbols and inspirations. Today, striking to preserve the sacred Land is an inseparable part of Jewish nationalism.

For Shi'ites, however, these two elements have not been as pivotal as for the Jewish people. Although the Shi'ite people have been a minority in the Muslim world often persecuted at the hand of the ruling authorities, they never found themselves living among gentiles like the Jewish people, because the Sunni majority was, at the end of the day, their Muslim fellows. In Iran, where a Shi'ite majority has possessed the territory since the 16th century, exile has never been the case. Besides, the “land” of Iran is not sacred by itself according to Shi'ite theology. From the religious perspective, the land of Iran is important as long as a major Shi'ite population lives in there. Therefore, according to Shi'ism, the final redemption goes beyond the two factors of land and exile – it mostly concerns legitimacy and authority. In the following pages, I will further discuss the question of messianism and redemption and its link to nationalism in Judaism and Shi'ism.

I. Jewish and Muslim Trends to Messianism:

In general, a similar concept of redemption determines the attitude toward messianism in Judaism and in Shi'ism. Both Judaism and Shi'ism, in all of their forms and manifestations, have always maintained a concept of redemption as an “event” which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. Although there is no mentioning of the Messiah in either the Torah or the Koran, messianic teachings in Judaism and Shi'ism have further described the individual personality of the Messiah in detail. According to the Jewish religion, the Messiah shall descend from the King David's generation, whereas for the Shi'ites Mahdi is a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammad. The Jewish Messiah will be born at the end of time, while the Shi'ite people believe that their Hidden Imam has been physically living in this world since twelve centuries ago and he will continue to stay alive until the right time comes to fulfill his mission.

¹ For more details on different political implications of Shi'ite and Sunni branches of Islam, see Mahdi Ahouie, “*Shi'ia-Sunni encounter in the Middle East: The challenge of Religion and Politics*,” in Gyula Scurgai (ed.), **Geopolitics, Schools of Thought, Methods of Analysis and Case Studies**, Pregny: Edition de Penthes, 2009, pp. 121-128.

The chain of the Shi'ite Imams came to an end in the late 9th century, when the twelfth Imam "Mahdi" disappeared mysteriously under an increasing pressure over the Shi'ite population by the ruling Abbasid caliphs. Imam Mahdi then went into a long concealment until his return at an unknown date in the future, when he would bring justice to the world. Mahdi Bazargan, one of the most famous Iranian contemporary politicians and Islamologues, describes the belief in the Mahdi and in his final victory over the oppressor as the "secret of survival" for Shi'ism throughout all persecutions and sufferings at the hands of the Sunni ruling elite in history (Bazargan, n. d.).

The preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, in his valuable work "The Messianic Idea in Judaism," recognizes three forces within rabbinic Judaism—conservative, restorative, and utopian—and he concludes that the messianic idea crystallizes mostly out of the latter two forces together (Scholem, 1970). The same explanation can be envisaged with regard to the Shi'ite messianism. The restorative forces are directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal. More precisely, they are directed to a condition pictured by the historical fantasy and the memory of the nation as circumstances of an ideal past. Here hope is turned backwards to the re-establishment of an original state of things and to a "life with the ancestors." But there are, in addition, forces which press forward and renew; they are nourished by a vision of the future and receive utopian inspiration.

A high-ranking Shi'ite scholar, Ayatollah Safi Golpaygani has perfectly expressed the combination of restorative and utopian trends in his description of the Mahdi's future government on earth:

"The righteous government and [political] system [in the world] is only one and that would be reliant on God and based on the laws of the Lord. The characteristics [of such a government] are mentioned in the Koran and in the reliable hadiths, and the Prophet Mohammad and Imam Ali have also manifested it in reality (Safi Golpaygani, 1388: 198)."

When the messianic idea appears as a living force in both Judaism and Shi'ism, it always occurs in the closest connection

with apocalypticism. In these instances the Messianic idea constitutes both a content of religious faith as such and also living, acute anticipation. Apocalypticism appears as the form necessarily created by acute Messianism (Scholem, 1970). In an almost natural way, messianic apocalypticism orders the old promises and traditions, along with the newly adhering motifs, interpretations, and reinterpretations, under the two aspects which the messianic idea henceforth takes on and keeps in Jewish and Shi'ite consciousness. These two aspects are based on the catastrophic and destructive nature of the redemption on the one hand and the utopianism of the content of realized Messianism on the other. Scholem describes Jewish Messianism in its origins and by its nature a theory of catastrophe, which stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the messianic future (Scholem, 1970).

Ali Shariati, one of the most famous Iranian contemporary Islamologues, has described the Shi'ite understanding of the coming of the Hidden Imam exactly in the same way—a world revolution which will begin with horror and bloodshed but will result in the establishment of a global government based on justice (Shariati, 1388). Based on several Shi'ite hadiths, Mahdi Bazargan also describes the catastrophic situation of the world which will lead to the coming of the Mahdi:

"When the Imam of the Time (Mahdi) will appear the world has been filled with oppression... passion and greed for more money has become like people's religion... people are stuck in injustice, famine, disputes, revolts, and constant stress...(Bazargan, n. d :8)"

Judaism and Shi'ism alike take the catastrophic nature of redemption as a decisive characteristic of every such apocalypticism, which is then complemented by the utopian view of the content of realized redemption. Apocalyptic thinking always contains the elements of dread and consolation intertwined (Scholem, 1970). The dread and peril of the End form an element of shock which induces extravagance. The terrors of the real historical experiences of the Jewish/Shi'ite people are joined with images drawn from the heritage of myth or mythical fantasy.

The paradoxical nature of this conception exists in the fact that the redemption which is born here is in no causal

sense a result of previous history. It is precisely the lack of transition between history and redemption which is always stressed by the Jewish prophets and apocalyptists. The Bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to the redemption. The redemption is not the product of immanent developments. It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruins because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source. The apocalyptists have always cherished a pessimistic view of the world. Their optimism and hope is not directed to what history will bring forward, but to that which will arise in its ruins, free at last and undisguised. Shi'ism, on a similar level, only envisages a "negative" development in history—an intolerable rise in injustice and oppression across the world—that will lead to the coming of the savior. As mentioned in a famous hadith, the Mahdi will fill the world with justice just as it was previously filled with injustice and oppression. According to Mahdi Bazargan, the Shi'ite messianic belief contains both negative and positive aspects: the negative part of the story is that humankind would become completely frustrated and maddened by repressive systems and increasing oppression in the world, but the positive point is that they would eventually and voluntarily find refuge in and welcome the ideal government of the Mahdi based on righteousness and justice (Bazargan, n. d.). On this basis, Bazargan believes in a gradual growth and progress in people's minds which will prepare them for the final redemption. Similarly, Shariati also talks about a "historical necessity," which will bring about redemption and justice at the End of Times. He regards it as a "positive philosophy of history," and a "philosophical optimism," which should encourage the believer to actively remain hopeful and optimistic about the future (Shariati, 1388: 290). But neither Shariati's belief in optimism nor Bazargan's belief in people's mental progress and preparation negate a rather stronger pessimism in their messianic ideology about the current path of history leading toward injustice and oppression. In the Shi'ite perspective, today human society as it is will only end up in a deadlock and failure in all aspects; therefore there will be a need for the savior to come and save the entire humanity. Shariati argues that the Mahdi will come to complete the thread of all those who have fought for justice throughout history (Shariati, 1388). However, one should not forget about the spontaneity of the redemption.

As mentioned in most Shi'ite resources, Mahdi's revolution will take place suddenly, unannounced, and precisely when hope has long been abandoned.

Based on what was discussed above, two major factions can be recognized with regard to Messianism in both Judaism and Shi'ism:

1- *Passive Messianism*: This trend is based on traditional orthodoxy, which allows no human action in social and political arenas before the coming of the Messiah (or Mahdi). Redemption will take place only by divine intervention and it's forbidden to hasten it by human actions in society. According to this view, any political movement originated in the messianic tradition would be anti-messianic because it sought to "force the End" prematurely. Sociologists of religion may call this trend "rejectionist," since it adopts a position of rejection vis-à-vis modern national movements. The ultra-orthodox Jewish factions, such as *Haredim*, as well as the *Hasidic* Jews believe in passive messianism.

The majority of Jewish Orthodox leaders condemned Zionism from its very outset as a deviation against Jewish traditional passivity and also because of the secularity of the national idea and the Zionist leaders' and settlers' repudiation of religious practice (Ravitzky, 2006). For example, Rabbi Shalom Dov Baer Schneersohn laid the cornerstone of a principled ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) critique of Zionism since the very early years of the Zionist movement in 1899. Schneersohn is a good example of a passivist and traditionalist Jewish leader, who found the political Zionist awakening—quite apart from the movement's secular character—a denial of messianism, both because of Zionists' arrogance in seeking to bring redemption through human efforts, and because it stopped short of the perfection of the original messianic vision (Ravitzky, 2006).

In Shi'ism, too, the mainstream of religious orthodoxy has usually supported the passive trend toward the coming of the Mahdi. Among the contemporary Shi'ite scholars, the Grand Ayatollah Hussein Borujerdi, the unarguable leader of the religious mainstream in Iran in the midst of the twentieth century, and more recently, Grand Ayatollah Abolqassem Khu'i were the best examples of those believing in passive messianism. To prove their position,

they often referred the path of most Shi'ite Imams (after Imam Hussein) who generally avoid interfering in politics and they even banned their followers from any militant action against the ruling caliphs. These Ayatollahs and many others within religious orthodoxy were harshly opposed to any political action by the Shi'ite believers in order to hasten the coming of the Hidden Imam. He had even publicly banned any political activity by religious scholars, as something opposed to religious orthodoxy.

2- Active Messianism: This is a rather contemporary phenomenon in both Judaism and Shi'ism, which approves and even encourages political actions before the coming of the Messiah (or Mahdi) in order to hasten the final redemption. Active messianism has borrowed modern concepts such as nation-state and has widely been influenced by contemporary nationalism.

Below, I will review the evolution of active Messianism within Jewish and Shi'ite worlds, so to explore the similarities among them.

II. The Evolution of Active Messianism in Judaism and Shi'ism:

Under religious activism, two different approaches can be recognized. The first option is both messianic and activist. This approach takes a stance of "expansion," seeking to broaden the traditional boundary of messianism to encompass, *ab initio*, modern nationalism. But there is also a second option, which is careful to isolate nationalist movements from messianic expectations and to measure its actions by the yardstick of ordinary historical achievement. It adduces an approach of "compartmentalization," wholly separating the realm of nationalism from that of messianism. The difference between this trend and the passive/rejectionist approach is that the latter would totally disapprove any political actions before the coming of the Messiah from a religious perspective, but the former does not find contemporary nationalist movements in Jewish and Muslim worlds to be contradictory to religious faith, but it only removes the element of messianism from them.

The focus of this paper is on the first option of religious activism – the one which is based on messianism.

1- The Evolution of Active Messianism in the Jewish World:

In the Jewish world, a few Orthodox ideologues began to articulate a different, more activist and worldly vision of redemption during the nineteenth century. Some even called upon the Jewish people to take a messianic initiative: to begin a gradual process of immigration to the Land of Israel as a necessary and organic step toward full redemption. Among the most well-known figures of this new initiative were Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer (Prussia, d. 1874) and Rabbi Judah Alkalai (Serbia, d. 1878) and other "Lovers of Zion." These pioneers of religious Zionism, known as the "Harbingers of Zionism," saw messianic redemption not only as a one-time event but also as a process; not merely as a revolution but rather as an evolution. The Messianism of the *Harbingers*, in contrast to the prevalent *Haredi* one, did not regard partial national reconstruction as a phenomenon that shatters, uproots, and destroys the whole, but rather as an organic link in the very development of that whole. As such, partial redemption becomes legitimate. Moreover, a clear distinction is drawn between the messianic process which is a concrete historical development, and the messianic goal, a utopia that transcends history. This distinction between the ongoing process and the final goal allows the believers to regard the present as an open field for mundane human activity and voluntary communal initiative, and it sparks decidedly activist element within the traditional messianic faith (Ravitzky, 2006). These human efforts, however, are to be completed with a miraculous divine revelation that bursts beyond the boundaries of man and nature.

The Harbingers' doctrine of redemption had very limited influence at the time. It failed to gain significant support among the rabbinical leadership or among the majority of Orthodox Jewry. Even those religious leaders who supported the Lovers of Zion and the organized settlement movement tended to base their position on other arguments, such as the unity of the people and the sanctity of the land, while repressing messianic motives or rejecting them out of hand. The *Mizrachi* movement was the most systemic critical response to the Harbingers of Zionism. However, dynamic religious movements, by their nature, require scriptural endorsement, and religious Zionism was no exception. Suddenly, the new militants declared the

more moderate doctrines out of date and insisted on giving their allegiance to a far more radical theology. The idea of the Harbingers was thus revised and revitalized by a new generation of religious Zionists. The Kooks, father and son, have been the most influential characters in reestablishing the expansionist vision with regard to Messianism.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine during the 1920s until the mid-1930s, is for no doubt one of the greatest and most influential inspirers of religious Zionism. Kook departed significantly not just from conventional Orthodoxy but also from the argument that creating a refuge in the Holy Land was a purely political act, religiously neutral (Viorst, 2002). In 1898, when political Zionism was in its infancy, Kook, a young Latvian rabbi, published his first writing on the question of relation between the Jewish national revival and the laws of Torah. He developed an original, bold approach to the new national undertaking in terms of its religious significance. On the one hand, he attempted to defend Zionism against its ultra-Orthodox critics, and of the other hand he rejected outright the secular tendencies associated with Zionism. Unlike the other Zionist rabbis of his time, he continued to elaborate the dream of the Harbingers of Zionism, endowing the Zionist undertaking with a clearly messianic import. He took an activist, worldly stance on the question of national revival and argued that Jewish people had a “sacred duty” to put an end to their exile by their “own efforts.” (Ravitzky, 2006: 87) He went further to speak openly of “the generation of the Messiah” and “the roots of the coming of the Messiah” as being embodied in the concrete historical process of the return to Zion. In following the political philosophy of Maimonides, Kook believed that political freedom for the nation is a necessary precondition for spiritual freedom and cultural efflorescence. Therefore, returning to the Holy Land would be a prerequisite for the spiritual revival of the Jewish people. On the other hand, he warned the dangers of nationalism when separated from religion, arguing that there could not be a political rebirth without a parallel spiritual force to guide it. In Kook’s perspective, it is only the religious spirit that can protect the Jewish national revival from the malady of totalitarianism (Ravitzky, 2006). The core of Kook’s theory is a firm emphasis on an organic connection between the “national idea” and the “divine idea” – there can be no revival of the one without revival of the other.

Kook saw the secular rebellion as being itself part of the process of religious redemption. He had achieved a dialectical view of progress according to which “destruction for the sake of construction is itself a kind of construction. (Ravitzky, 2006: 106)” As a result, what is religiously sacred could even be built up by the fresh efforts of secular, heretic forces. He believed that out of the depth of the crisis created by the secular revolution will emerge a new, richer understanding of the boundless divinity (Ravitzky, 2006).

In analyzing Kook’s political thought, Ravitzky (2006) believes that the Rabbi had distinguished carefully between the subjective intentions of the individual acting in history and the objective results of his or her actions. One may play an effective role in a sequence of events, helping to move matters along and even struggling toward a certain end, without grasping the inner logic of the events, their true meaning or real consequences. This is the convoluted path of what Kook calls “the irony of history.” (Ravitzky, 2006: 111) Therefore, he had no worry about the secular nature of Zionism, since he was convinced that the seculars would eventually be blessed by the truth of faith, and even if they did not turn into religious people, the outcome of their efforts would be beneficial to the greatest religious goals.

Kook’s messianic expectations freed him of the necessity to confront the question of what concrete, pre-messianic Jewish sovereignty would entail. His utopianism relieved him of the need to provide detailed halakhic solutions to the many difficult questions concerning the modern return of the Jews to their homeland. Yet his disciples have been plunged into this reality and must somehow find their way in it. This challenge could be expected to sow the seeds of ideological tension and social polarization.

Rabbi Kook’s teachings did not rapidly win large numbers of adherents in the religious-Zionist camp. Nor did the seeds of radicalization in his doctrine bear fruit until a full generation after his death in 1935. Though his ideas were always in the air and were enthusiastically quoted, few took the trouble to study them in depth or to construct a social or political program around them. Nevertheless, these ideas began to play a central role in Israeli politics in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War. Kook’s son, Zvi

Yehuda had labored for more than thirty years to lay the groundwork for this development, and the disciples he has gathered around him had been consciously preparing for it since the 1950s². Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and his school carried the elder Kook's notion of redemption to its logical extreme³. They also saw in the new reality of Israel the certain realization of his utopian vision. Kook the son translated the teachings of his father into the language of action. "Though he himself was not a man of action, he was able to bring his father's exalted ideas into focus in such a way that when, at just the right moment, they encountered a public yearning to act, they turned into a powerful movement"⁴. Under Zvi Yehuda's interpretation of his father's thoughts, what was a messianic expectation becomes a political program, holiness comes to be embodied in a given state structure, and historical progress is limited to the Israeli scene. He re-created religious Zionism from a well-meaning complement to secular Zionism into a radical nationalism imbued with faith. From the junior Kook's perspective, the messianic significance of the modern return to Zion was not confined to the national plane, to the ingathering of the exiles and the recovery of sovereignty over the land; it is part of a cosmic process of universal redemption. Hence, "historical necessity" is intertwined with "cosmic determination," and together they guarantee success. This is quite a new and remarkable version of the elder Kook's idea of progress⁵.

This messianic theology has had clear implications for politics, settlement activity, and military affairs. According to Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, "part of this redemption is the conquest and settlement of the land. This is dictated by divine politics, and no earthly politics can supersede it. He goes so far as to identify the eternal Israel and its transcendent power explicitly with the political and military power of the State of Israel:

"The State of Israel is divine...Not only can/must there be no retreat from [a single] kilometers of the Land of Israel, God forbid, but on the contrary, we shall conquer and liberate more and more, as much in the spiritual [as in the physical] sense...We are stronger than America, stronger than Russia. With all the troubles and delays [we suffer], our position in the world, the world of history, the cosmic world, is stronger and more secure in its timelessness than theirs...In our divine, world-encom-

passing undertaking, there is no room for retreat (Ravitzky, 2006:132)."

The ideology of messianic determinism grew gradually more extreme and radicalized from Rabbi Abraham Kook to his son, to the latter's disciples, and to a new generation of youngsters. *Gush Emunim* is the best example of a radical messianic-nationalist movement directly inspired and created by the teachings of the junior Kook.⁶

2- The Evolution of Active Messianism in Shi'ism:

In contemporary Iran, several of the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s can be compared to the Harbingers of Zionism. One can specifically refer to Mahdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, and Ali Shariati. Many years before the Islamic Revolution, they all provided an "activist" interpretation of Shi'ite messianic ideology. In one of the earliest works on Shi'ite messianism by Iranian contemporary Islamists, Bazargan said in the early 1960s in a speech to a group of Islamist students that expecting the Hidden Imam may not be limited to passively awaiting him, but it required action: "We should not think that Imam Mahdi's action will be a totally unprecedented and self-growing one, without any grounds and prior preparations (Bazargan, n.d:111)".

² For an in-depth study of this process, see Gideon Aran, *"From Religious Zionism to a Zionist Religion: The Roots of Gush Emunim and its Culture,"* (in Hebrew), doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 1-99.

³ For a collection of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's perspectives on a variety of issues, see Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook, **Torat Eretz Yisrael, The Teachings of Harav Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook**, Translated in English and edited by Tzvi Fishman, Jerusalem: Torat Eretz Yisrael Publications, 1991.

⁴ This is a phrase by Rabbi Ya'akov Ariel, one of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's leading disciples as quoted in Ravitzky, 2006: 123.

⁵ Jacob Katz has noted that during a number of phases in the history of Zionism there appeared a "messianic determinism," which assumed *ab initio* the predestined connection between the people and its land. See Jacob Katz, *"Israel and the Messiah," Commentary*, No. 36, 1988, pp. 31-34. See also Shmuel Almog, **Zionism and History**, New York and Jerusalem: 1987, pp. 67-80.

⁶ For an in-depth study of Gush Emunim's ideology and evolution, see Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *"Jewish Messianism, Religious Zionism, and Israeli Politics: The Impact and Origins of Gush Emunim," Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 1987), pp. 215-234.

He added that two opposite streams were presenting themselves throughout all events in the world: oppression and injustice on the one hand and justice-seeking on the other. He suggested that these two fronts should confront each other and the righteous side should prevail (at least partially) in order for the people to find conviction in the truth of the prophets' promises and the road would be paved for the coming of the Mahdi and final redemption. This way, Bazargan approved the necessity of "partial redemption" exactly as the Harbingers did. "It is our task," he said, "to constantly present the righteous word and especially the righteous action against each of the actions of the wicked front (Bazargan, n. d.: 115-116)." According to Bazargan (n. d.), partial redemption and providing an "example" for the victory of justice over oppression was pivotal for preparing the ground for the coming of the Hidden Imam: "We should be hopeful and happy and proud and active and we should turn the Imam's expectation away from silence and passivity and become pioneers of this great jihad and soldiers of the Hidden Imam's army from now (Bazargan, n. d.: 120)"

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari was one of the most well-known contemporary Shi'ite philosophers and one of the most influential leaders and ideologues of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Several years before the Revolution, Motahhari wrote a short essay on the Mahdi's "uprising and revolution" from the perspective of the philosophy of history. In this essay, Motahhari also advocated for the idea of "partial redemption" as he said "partial and gradual reform can never be condemned" since not only they do not delay the final redemption but they will contribute to the righteous people's fighting against the wicked people, and it will therefore accelerate and hasten the final victory of righteousness over evil (Motahhari, 1387: 42-43). Motahhari harshly criticizes the passive approaches to messianism, arguing that the only right way of expectation according to the Koran and Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet and Imams) is the activist path, in which the believers would actively "prepare" themselves for welcoming the final redemption (Motahhari, 1387). He describes the Mahdi's movement as the "last step in the chain of conflicts between good and evil which have existed since the emergence of the world (Motahhari, 1387: 59)." He further talks about a Shi'ite belief about "a government run by a group of righteous people" which will continue

until the coming of the Mahdi. Without any reference to the Islamic Revolution, he concludes that such a belief by itself means that the righteous front would not and should not be totally abandoned prior to the coming of the final savior (Motahhari, 1387).

Ali Shariati was also a major ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, whose ideas on active messianism sound similar to those of the Harbingers of Zionism. In a public speech which was later published under the title "expectation, the school of protest," Shariati provides a revolutionary and resistant picture of the Shi'ite messianic ideology. Shariati distinguishes two manners for expecting the Hidden Imam: the passive manner, which he strongly denounces, and the activist approach which he passionately supports. According to Shariati (Shariati, 1388), expecting the Mahdi should not only be a silent aspiration for the believers, but it should work as a social and political force, an engine for actively protesting against the existing status-quo in the world. Like Bazargan and Motahhari, Shariati also sees the coming of the Mahdi not as the first but as the "last" step in the chain of a constant and ongoing confrontation between good and evil, justice and injustice. This impression of messianism is very similar to the Harbinger's perspective to consider messianic redemption as a process – an evolution which will however lead towards the final revolution.

In contemporary Shi'ism, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is for no doubt the most famous scholar who advocated and practiced a maximalist activist approach to messianism. Ayatollah Khomeini used to harshly attack Shi'ite traditionalist scholars who disapproved the idea of the establishment of an Islamic government prior to the coming of the Mahdi, and accused them for being "irresponsible" and far away from the truth of Islam (Khomeini, 1369). According to Ayatollah Khomeini, it was absolutely necessary for the *shari'a* rules to be implemented in Muslim society even though the Imam of the Time (Mahdi) is absent:

"I would like to pose this question: from the Imam's disappearance up to now it has been more than a thousand years and it possible that some more hundred thousand years would pass and [God'] expediency would not require the Imam to come. Should the Islamic rules be abandoned during such a long time, and should everybody do

whatever they like? Is there supposed to be anarchy? The laws that the Prophet of Islam dedicated breathtaking efforts during twenty-three years to announce, disseminate, and practice, were they only for a limited period of time? Did God restrict His laws only to two hundred years?⁷ And did Islam give up all of its [shari'a] after the disappearance [of the Imam] (Khomeini, 1388: 27)?"

Ayatollah Khomeini's answer to all of these questions was negative. He, therefore, came up with a solution which was unprecedented in Shi'ite orthodoxy: to establish a theocracy under clerical rule to govern the society in accordance with religious laws. And in order to establish such an Islamic government, it would be necessary for the Shi'ites to "rise up" for the sake of God and in following the task that the Hidden Imam will eventually complete (Khomeini, 1369). Ayatollah Khomeini repeatedly stressed the need for the Shi'ite people's "preparation" for meeting and welcoming the Mahdi, and made it clear that such a preparation would not be maintained through passivity and inaction. He described the main task of the Islamic government in Iran to "implement the just divine rule" in society, and also to support all the oppressed in the world in order to prepare the ground for the final movement led by the Mahdi (Khomeini, 1369). He also put much emphasis on the role of the Iranian nation in anticipating the coming of the Hidden Imam:

"May God bless, as everything has thus far been going on successfully by His covert help, so this country which is the country of the righteous Imams and the country of the Imam of the Time (Mahdi) would preserve its independence until the latter's promised appearance. Then it will hopefully lay its power in His Highness's service to – God willing - bring justice to the world and to put an end to all the oppressions from which the repressed are suffering (Khomeini, 1369, Vol. 14: 195)".

The utopian factor was also a pivotal part of Ayatollah Khomeini's approach to messianism. He considered the redemption under the Mahdi as the final redemption of all the mankind from all corruptions and deviations. The Ayatollah hoped that with the expansion of the Islamic Revolution in the world, the "evil powers" would get isolated and "governments of the oppressed" would be established throughout the globe to "prepare the ground for the world

government of the Mahdi of the End of Times (Khomeini, 1369, Vol. 15: 187)." Yet, he never anticipated when this would occur, nor did he claim that such a goal would necessarily be achieved in an early future.

In recent years, a more extremist approach to active messianism has appeared in Iran – a phenomenon which is best represented by current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This new faction of Shi'ite millenarians believes that the End of Times has already begun and that the coming of the Savior is imminent. Under these circumstances, the "Iranian nation and government" are assigned to carry out a "special mission" and they will play a crucial role to pave the way for the Hidden Imam to come. (Tabnak news website, 2010). In Ahmadinejad's perspective, therefore, messianism is regarded in more objective terms and less philosophical. About the imminence of the redemption, Ahmadinejad said:

"Some people regard the Islamic Revolution as preparing the ground for the final move [toward redemption], but the Islamic Revolution is itself part of the final move. The final move has already begun and god willing it will soon reach its ultimate victory (Official website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2010)".

Saying that the Islamic government in Iran has been established precisely to lead the people toward final redemption under the Mahdi, Ahmadinejad argued that the emergence of the Hidden Imam's government is imminent and much closer than many people might think and that the Iranian Shi'ite people should prepare themselves to take a role and responsibility in Mahdi's future government (Borna news website: 2010). In Ahmadinejad's ideology, Iranian nation will play a central role in the messianic events which will lead the whole mankind toward final redemption. According to him:

"We must define our mission in the context of the [Mahdi's] world revolution. Thanks to God's blessings and thanks to

⁷ The chain of the Shi'ite Imams as direct descendants and successors of the Prophet continued during almost two hundred years since the death of Mohammad, when the twelfth Imam went into hiding. Since then the chain of the Shi'ite Imams has come to an end. Here, Khomeini is referring to this period, when the Shi'ite Imams were present among their followers.

the emergence of the Islamic Republic and to the resistance of the great Iranian nation, the world is today at the edge of final movement [toward redemption]. As a result, we have two major missions: to construct our own country, and to make the world aware of the [Hidden] Imam's path and authority (Tabnak news website, 2010)".

III. Conclusion:

Messianism/Mahdism as the belief in the heavenly ordained redemption of the Jewish/Shi'ite people and the whole of mankind is a central tenet of Judaism/Shi'ism. The traditional concept of Jewish/Shi'ite messianism reflected a passive and a-political attitude, which obliged Jews to await patiently the miraculous coming of the Messiah/Mahdi. The novelty of religious Zionism/Iranian Revolution was that they introduced the political dimension into Jewish/Shi'ite messianic tradition, by insisting on the religious right and obligation of the believers in the post-emancipation period to take an active part in the process of God-ordained national redemption. This was to be accomplished by political, economic and other activities aimed at resettling the Jews in the Land of Israel/establishing an Islamic government in Iran.

However, as Eliezer Don-Yehiya (1987: 222) aptly points out, there is no inherent contradiction between "Messianism" and a pragmatic and realistic approach to the concrete issues of practical politics. Various kinds of messianic theology can be distinguished on the basis of their potential for radical politics. There is the passive form, in which the messianic vision is not translated into political action; indeed, such action may even be prohibited, viewed as a violation of God's will. While this passive approach cannot of course be reconciled with radical politics, not all the forms of "active Messianism" should lead necessarily to the endorsement of an extremist or radical political style. "Active Messianism" in its various forms is a theory or model of historical interpretation which has clear and deliberate political implications. Such a theory may include a comprehensive and radical program of political action for the immediate and full-scale realization of the messianic vision. But it might also be compatible with a moderate and pragmatic approach, which takes into consideration the conditions of social and political reality.

One should draw a distinction between "messianism" as a theory, a principle of historical interpretation, and "messianism" which is also an operative program for political action. While the first may also have practical political implications, in this case it is the nature of the desired goals and purposes which is defined by the messianic vision, and not the political means for their realization, which are to be decided upon and implemented in accordance with practical and rationalistic considerations. By contrast, messianism as a political program means that not only the goals, but also the means for their attainment, are governed by messianic ideas and attitudes. Hence, in this approach radical politics are an integral part of the messianic theology which legitimizes and prescribes this style of politics.

To conclude, the extremist active messianists in both Shi'ism and Judaism are indeed unique and novel phenomena, and their uniqueness and novelty lies not in their "political radicalism" nor in their messianism as such, but rather in their transformation of the Jewish/Shi'ite messianic vision into a radical and all-embracing political program to be fully implemented here and now.

The purpose of this paper was not to make any analogy between Iran and Israel as political establishments. For obvious reasons, the "Islamic Republic" and the "Jewish State" are conceptually and structurally very different entities. This research, however, showed the linkage between messianic ideology and nationalism in contemporary Shi'ite and Jewish political theologies. In both cases, religion is lending its sanction to an innovative one (i.e. Jewish and Shi'ite political sovereignty), a structure that represents revolutionary change in the life of the people. We have seen how end-time scenarios can motivate the faithful to self-referencing idealism and acts of heroic self-sacrifice. We have also acknowledged the toll in human suffering that too often accompanies this chauvinistic interpretation of religion.

As Landau (2009) poses, one may wonder how Shi'ite Muslims and religious Jews can 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? 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. 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.

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