

RAMBAM: A MAN OF LETTERS

אגרת תימן
(LETTER TO THE
YEMENITES)







“MESSIANISM” IN ISLAM

When Muhammad died in 632, he was first succeeded by his companions Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman, who assumed the title of Caliph, meaning substitute. When Uthman was assassinated in 656, his place was taken by Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Ali’s succession was opposed by the Umayyads, leading to a civil war and his assassination in 661.

This marked the division among Muslims between the **Sunni** (traditionalists) who supported the Umayyads, and **Shi`ites** (partisans), who supported Hasan and Hussein, the sons of Ali. Hussein’s death at the battle of Karbala in 680 initiated the Shi`ite tradition of martyrdom.

Muslims have no institution comparable to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and, therefore, experienced nothing comparable to its destruction. Since their attempts at conquest were rewarded with success that remain unchanged over most of their early history, neither did they experience anything comparable to exile. As a result, **Sunni** Muslims are generally unconcerned with either the concept of redemption, in general, or with the Messiah, a Redeemer, in particular.

Shi`ism tells a different story. Because its roots lie in the historical failure to realize its political aspirations, and on account of the cruel massacre of its early leaders in Karbala, Shi`ism developed a tradition of suffering, torment, and affliction (including self-flagellation), and, alongside it, the aspiration towards future and ultimate redemption. The most important religious idea of Shi`ism is, arguably, the belief in a Messiah like figure called the **Mahdi** (Arabic for the divinely guided one) who will restore Muslim rule to the descendants of Muhammad through Ali and will usher in the equivalent of the end of days.



It is not surprising, then, that during the Geonic and early medieval periods, Jewish history in the orbit of Islam was replete with episodes of sectarianism and false Messianism occurring primarily, although not exclusively, in areas of Shi`ite influence such as **Yemen** and **Persia**.

The 12th century in particular saw a veritable outbreak of messianic fervor due, in large part, to the disruption of ordinary Jewish life on account of the Crusades, with the clash between East (Christendom) and West (Islam) serving as a backdrop for considerable speculation and anticipation.



נסתרות רבי שמעון בר יוחאי

Said R. Shim'on: "How will salvation come at the hands of the Yishmaelim [Muslims]?" Said Metatron: "God will provide them with a prophet [Muhammad] who will conquer the land [of Israel] for them. They will rebuild ruined cities, clear the roads, plant gardens and orchards and return the land to you vastly improved....

Then the second King of Yishmael [Omar] will conquer all the empires. He will come to Jerusalem and worship there [see the previous text]. He will fight the Edomim [Christians] who will flee before him.... He will be a friend of Israel. He will seal the breaches in the walls [of Israel's cities] and the breaches of the Temple. He will clear off Mount Moriah, level it off entirely, and build a Temple." Had the Jews been worthy, the scion of David [Messiah] would have arisen immediately, at the start of the kingdom of Yishmael. Since they were unworthy, however, he will not come until the end of their kingdom.

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ספר 1

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אגרת תימן להרמב"ם זצ"ל

The *Iggeret Teiman*, by the *Rambam*, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing

העתיקה רבי נחום מערבי ז"ל וקרא שמה פתח תקוה

The copyist, Rabbi Nahum Ma'arabi, called it the *Petah Tikvah*

מני אנא משה ב"ר מיימן הדיין ב"ר יוסף החכם ב"ר יצחק הרב ב"ר עובדיה הדיין ז"ל :

I, Moses, son of Maimon the Judge, son of Joseph the Wise, son of Isaac the Teacher, son of Obadiah the Judge, of blessed memory:

חזקו ידים רפות וברכים כושלות אמצו. לכבוד גדול וקדוש מר ורב **יעקב** החכם הנחמד היקר הנכבד **בן** כבוד מר ורב **נתנאל** ז"ל בן **אלפיומי** ובכלל כל אלופיני אחינו כל תלמידי הקהלות אשר בארץ תימן ישמרם צורם ויגן בעדם אמן סלה :

“Strengthen weak hands and fortify shaking knees.” To the honored, great, and holy Master and Teacher, Jacob, wise and genial, dear and revered sage, son of the honored, great, and holy Master and Teacher, **Nathaniel Fayyumi**, distinguished Prince of Yemen, president of its congregations, leader of its communities, may the spirit of God rest upon him, and upon all his associates and upon all the scholars of the communities of Yemen. May the Lord keep and protect them.



ABU ISA OF ISFAHAN

The final defeat of the Umayyads (c.750) brought to power the dynasty of the 'Abbasids, whose revolutionary propaganda also stressed the coming of a new age. Following the murder of the prominent Abbasid leader Abu Muslim by the caliph Manṣūr (754-775), local insurrections broke out. The details of these revolts are poorly known, but they seem to be relatively insignificant affairs tied to local concerns. Against this background, the affair of Abū 'Īsā and the 'Īsāwīya, the “movement” he founded, seems plausible.

Abū 'Īsā allegedly gathered 10,000 partisans whom he commanded in battle as the forerunner of the Messiah. He was ultimately killed along with his men by the caliph Manṣūr near Ray. His followers believed that his death was an illusion and that in reality he had miraculously disappeared, an escape characteristic of other messianic pretenders whose return was eagerly awaited.



Abū 'Īsā pretended to be a prophet. The miraculous sign of his prophecy was the fact that, although illiterate, he managed to produce books. He prohibited divorce and increased the daily prayers from three to seven based on Psalm 119:164 (“Seven times daily I praise you”). His prophetic inspiration caused him to declare certain ascetic practices, such as a ban on meat and intoxicating beverages otherwise permitted by normative Judaism. However, in other practices he was considered a follower of the Rabbanites, and his following, which continued as a group for several centuries, was considered to be within the fold of normative Judaism. This is clear, since they married within the fold. However, Qerqesānī indicates that Abū 'Īsā believed in the prophecy of Jesus and Moḥammad. He held that both of them were sent by God to minister to the needs of their people and to encourage the reading of their holy scriptures. The Karaite authority ascribes these last views to political cynicism on the part of Abū 'Īsā.



"I shall now narrate to you succinctly several episodes subsequent to the rise of the Arabic kingdom from which you will derive some benefit. One of these refers to the Exodus of a multitude of Jews, numbering hundred of thousands, from the East beyond Isfahan, led by an individual who pretended to be the Messiah. They were accoutered with military equipment, and drawn swords, and slew all those that encountered them. They reached, according to the information I received, the vicinity of Baghdad. This happened in the beginning of the reign of the Umayyads...

When the sages met these Jews, the latter declared: "We belong to the children of the district beyond the River." Then they asked them: "Who instigated you to make this uprising?" Whereupon they replied: "This man here, one of the descendants of David, whom we know to be pious and virtuous. This man, whom we knew to be a leper at night, arose the following morning healthy and sound." They believed that leprosy was one of the characteristics of the Messiah...

The Sultan turned over to them so and so many thousands of dinars by way of hospitality in order that they should leave his country. But after they had returned home, he had a change of heart with respect to the Jews upon whom he imposed a fine for his expenditures. He ordered them to make a special mark on their garments, the writing of the word "cursed," and to attach one iron bar in the back and one in the front. Ever since then the communities of Khorasan and Isfahan experienced the tribulations of the Diaspora."



MOSES AL-DARR'I

- “About fifty years ago or less, a pious and virtuous man and scholar by the name of Moses Al-Dar'i came from Dar'a to the province of Andalusia to study under Rabbi Joseph ha-Levi, of blessed memory, ibn Migash, of whom you very likely have heard. Later he left for Fez, the center of Maghreb. People flocked to him because of his piety, virtue, and learning. He informed them that the Messiah had come, as was divinely revealed to him in a dream. Yet he did not pretend based on a divine communication, as did the former lunatic, that he was the Messiah. He merely affirmed that the Messiah had appeared. Many people became his adherents and reposed faith in him.
- My father and master, of blessed memory, endeavored to dissuade and discourage people from following him. However only a few were influenced by my father, while most, nay nearly all clung to R. Moses, of blessed memory. Finally he predicted events which came true no matter what was going to occur. He would say: "I was informed yesterday--this and this would happen," and it did happen exactly as he foretold.”

When the majority of the people put their trust in him, he predicted that the Messiah would come that very year on Passover eve. He advised the people to sell their property and contract debts to the Muslims with the promise to pay back ten dinars for one, in order to observe the precepts of the Torah in connection with the Passover festival, for they will never see them again, and so they did.

When Passover came and nothing transpired, the people were ruined as most of them had disposed of their property for a trifling sum, and were overwhelmed with debt. When the Gentiles in the vicinity and their serfs learned of this hoax, they were minded to do away with him, had they located him. As this Muslim country no longer offered him protection he left for Palestine where he died, may his memory be blessed.



IBN ARYEH

My father of blessed memory, told me that about fifteen or twenty years before that episode, there lived respectable folks in Cordova, the center of Andalusia, some of whom were given to the cult of astrology. They were all of one mind that the Messiah would appear that year. They sought a revelation in a dream night after night and ascertained that the Messiah was a man of that city. They picked a pious and virtuous person by the name of **Ibn Aryeh** who had been instructing the people. They wrought miracles and made predictions just as Al-Dar'i did until they won over the hearts of all the people.

When the influential and learned men of our community heard of this, they assembled in the synagogue and had Ibn Aryeh brought there and had him flogged in public. Furthermore, they imposed a fine upon him, and put him into the ban, because he gave assent by his silence to the professions of his adherents, instead of restraining them and pointing out to them that they contradict our religion. They did the same thing to the persons who assembled about him. The Jews escaped the wrath of the Gentiles only with the greatest difficulty.



LYON

About forty years preceding the affair of Ibn Aryeh in Andalusia, there appeared a man in **Lyon**, a large center in the heart of France, which numbered more than ten thousand Jewish families. He pretended that he was the Messiah. He was supposed to have performed the following miracles: On moonlit nights he would go out and climb to the top of high trees in the field and glide from tree to tree like a bird. He cited a verse from Daniel to prove that such a miracle was within the power of the Messiah: "And behold, there came with the clouds of heaven One like unto a son of man ...And there was given him dominion." (7:13-14). Many who witnessed the miracle became his votaries. The French discovered this, pillaged and put many of his followers to death, together with the pretender. Some of them maintain however, that he is still hiding until this very day.

The prophets have predicted and instructed us, as I have told you, that **pretenders and simulators** will appear in great numbers at the time when the advent of the true Messiah will draw nigh, but they will not be able to make good their claim. They will perish with many of their partisans. Solomon, of blessed memory, inspired by the holy spirit, foresaw that the prolonged duration of the exile would incite some of our people to seek to terminate it before the appointed time, and as a consequence they would perish or meet with disaster. Therefore, he admonished and adjured them in metaphorical language to desist, as we read, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and by the hinds of the field, that ye awaken not, nor stir up love, until it please." ([Song of Songs 2:7](#), 8:4). Now, brethren and friends, abide by the oath, and stir not up love until it please ([Ketubot 111a](#)).



שיר השירים רבה (וילנא) פרשה ב
רַבִּי חֶלְבוֹ אָמַר אַרְבַּע שְׁבוּעוֹת יֵשׁ כָּאן,
הַשְּׁבִיעַ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁלֹּא יִמְרְדוּ עַל הַמַּלְכוּיֹת,
וְשֶׁלֹּא יִדְחֲקוּ עַל הַקָּץ,
וְשֶׁלֹּא יִגְלוּ מִסֵּטִירֵינָא שְׁלָהֶם לְאַמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם,
וְשֶׁלֹּא יַעֲלוּ חוֹמָה מִן הַגּוֹלָה.

Rabbi Helbo says: There are four oaths here.

He administered an oath to Israel that

*they would not rebel against the kingdoms;

*they would not accelerate [the advent of] the end of days;

*they would not reveal their secrets to the nations of the world;

*and they would not ascend as a wall from the Diaspora.

May God, Who created the world with the attributes of mercy grant us the privilege to behold the return of the exiles, to the portion of His inheritance, to contemplate the graciousness of the Lord, and to visit early in His Temple. May He take us out from the Valley of the Shadow of Death wherein He put us. May He remove darkness from our eyes, and gloom from our hearts. May he fulfill in our days as well as yours the prophecy contained in the verse, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." ([Isaiah 9:1](#)). May He darken our opponents in His anger and wrath, may He illuminate our obscurity, as it is written, "For behold darkness shall cover the earth ... but upon the Lord will shine." ([Isaiah 60:2](#)). Greetings unto you, my dear friend, master of the sciences, and paragon of learning, and unto our erudite colleagues, and unto all the rest of the people. Peace, peace, as the light that shines, and much peace until the moon be no more. Amen.



I beg you to send a copy of this missive to every community in the cities and hamlets, in order to strengthen the people in their faith and to put them on their feet. Read it at public gatherings and in private, and you will thus become a public benefactor. Take adequate precautions lest its contents be divulged to the Gentiles by an evil person and mishap overtake us (God spare us therefrom).²² When I began writing this letter I had some misgivings about it, but they were overruled by my conviction that the public welfare takes precedence over one's personal safety. Moreover, I am sending it to a personage such as you, "and the secret of the Lord may be entrusted to those who fear Him." Our sages, the successors of the prophets, assured us that persons engaged in a religious mission will meet with no disaster ([Pesahim 8b](#)). What more important religious mission is there than this. Peace be unto all Israel. Amen.

