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(Miriam Krupka Berger is Chair of the Tanakh Department of the Upper School of Ramaz. This article appears in issue 26 of Conversations, the journal of the Instsitute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.)

> *No, do the best you can to make the present production a success—don't spoil the entire play just because you happen to think of another one that you'd enjoy rather more.*
> *—Thomas More,* Utopia

In 1516, the British social philosopher Thomas More published his narrative *Utopia* , a work that would become central to the way in which humanity understood its ability to progress, to march toward perfectibility. The book compares social and economic conditions in Europe with those of an ideal society on an imaginary island located off the coast of the Americas. The title, *Utopia*, combines the Greek words *ou* ("no, not") and *topos* ("place") to imply that the perfect conditions of this land were purely fictional and could never exist in reality. The current use of the word *utopia* as referring to “an ideal place or society” references More’s original meaning and includes the connotation of non-existence; a modern “utopia” is a place that reflects imaginable, but unattainable perfection—whether in political, social, cultural or economic terms.

Michael Weingrad, in a Spring 2010 essay in the *Jewish Review of Books*, explores why it is that, both historically and in contemporary times, Jewish authors do not engage in the writing of fantasy literature. He specifically questions why Jews do not utilize the genre to discuss questions of theology or to paint fantastical pictures that probe deeper social and religious questions:

Indeed, one wonders why, amidst all the initiatives to solve the crisis in Jewish continuity, no one has yet proposed commissioning a Jewish fantasy series that might plumb the theological depths like Lewis or at least thrill Jewish preteens with tales of Potterish derring-do.[i]

The question is intriguing; there is no work of Jewish theology packaged in fictional fantasies like the tales of Lewis or Tolkien. However, the biblical canon does contain a wealth of "other-worldly" literature. Although they are not writers of fantasy literature, the prophets do describe the strangely utopian world of the Messianic Era.

Herein lie our questions: First, in what way is messianic prophecy similar to classic utopian writing, and in what way does it differ in its context and goals? Second, can biblical messianic literature be classified as an inspiration for, or early genre of, utopian literature? Finally, can our theological understanding of this specific messianic genre of *nevuot,* be enhanced through such an analysis?

To fully develop this comparison, we must begin with the following basic question: In addition to functioning as entertaining fairy tales, what did the envisioning and writing of utopias accomplish? Lyman Tower Sargent, renowned professor of utopian studies, notes that although utopias are multi-dimensional in form, all utopias represent some form of "social dreaming" that may or may not involve any active component.[ii] Sargent then acknowledges, however, that many "dreams" are accompanied minimally by thoughtful reasoning, and often, by the acting of the dreamer upon the dream.[iii] It was often the hope of certain "utopian socialists" that their fictional worlds would send a message to their society of what "perfection" looked like in the hope that their audience would progress toward that world by thinking about policies and ideas to improve the current reality. Regardless of whether the authors expected their readership to act upon these visions, utopias were commonly written as critiques of social or political ills in the writer's environment. Edward Bellamy's well-known *Looking Backward* is of a genre of utopias that speak of a world without money and with an idealized equal distribution of goods. It was Bellamy's way of criticizing the growth of capitalism in the early nineteenth century.

In terms of this specific function, the prophet Isaiah really was the earliest utopian writer. As were many utopian works, many of Isaiah's prophecies were written in war-torn and economically difficult periods.[iv] When he speaks of a world in which "nation shall not lift up sword against nation,"[v] or that all people will follow a unified path of religious and societal truth,[vi] he shapes the vision of this utopian world as a critique of the environment in which he finds himself. In Isaiah 2, the verses subsequent to the messianic elements quite clearly state this assumed critique; the people have abandoned God and worship power, wealth, and pride.[vii] The chapter then ends with a description of a world in which all humankind is humbled; idolatry is abandoned; and silver and gold become irrelevant in light of the truth (2:20).[viii] The straightforward social criticism in the subsequent verses clearly reveals Isaiah's vision of the perfect world that he describes as a tool for the creation of a "beneficial reality."[ix] Therefore, the biblical reader of messianic prophecy must remember that his work is less *descriptive* than it is *prescriptive*. And, in fact, was not one of the primary purposes of the biblical prophet to function as a critic of society? Why should the messianic prophecies be any different? By forecasting the future, the prophet hopes to create a more perfect tomorrow.

Interestingly, utopian literature itself came into being when humanity began to believe in the idea of progress and perfectibility. As societies moved from an "eat to live" mentality in which getting to the next day was all the future they could see, they began to think of bigger ideas like equality, economic equitability, and nationalism.[x] James Bury, in his well-known treatise *The Idea of Progress* points out that in most systems of ancient thought, time was regarded as "the enemy of humanity," and change meant "corruption and disaster." This was due to a "tendency characteristic of Greek philosophical thinkers to idealise the immutable as possessing a higher value than that which varies." Because of this, any form of change, especially when it came to social speculation, was often viewed negatively.[xi] As society shifted to a more hopeful view of social change and revolution, utopian thinkers reflected social thought, and mimicked the prophets in describing how spans of time could possibly harbor positive future change.

This is something the prophets understood for a long time; that human relations could be improved over time, and that personal and national status or character were not predetermined or unchangeable constructs. Indeed, by describing the messianic world as "*Aharit haYamim*" or the "End of the Days," Isaiah proposes and champions the idea that change can and must happen, even if it requires an extended period of time. Messianic prophecy functions with an eye toward the far future, a concept that first gained traction in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and that focused on the idea of existence and progress as more than just daily

survival.[xii]

But if the reader of prophetic messianism allows the comparison to end there, we will have ignored what it is that makes these *nevuot* truly unique. Let's start by focusing on three of the messianic constructs that Isaiah discusses: 1) theological clarity, 2) political unity, and 3) fulfillment of a national mission or destiny. Isaiah envisions a world in which all nations recognize a single religious truth (2:2–3); judgment of the poor is pure and uncorrupted (11:2–5); the world is at peace (2:4); and the Jewish nation is settled in Zion. To the prophet, these are all one construct—a result of the first factor on the list; once the world recognizes a single religious truth, the natural result of that truth will be social and political peace. This is the first key to understanding prophetic messianism in contrast to utopianism. While both views imagine that the world will one day be a peaceful and socially just place, *messianism is based on a belief in a God who wants those things, and that belief is how those ideals will be achieved*. In other words, the only way to stage a successful long-term social revolution is if we all serve a Higher Power external to humanity. If we don't, like Orwell's critique of socialist utopias in *Animal Farm*, one person or group of people in the construct, will inevitably succumb to the fatal flaw of power or pride. Prophetic messianism requires a belief in a Being outside of humanity who controls the world, without which cohesion of humankind is unattainable. Theological clarity is a necessary precursor to other ideals.

Secondly, regarding political unity, prophetic messianism revolves around the human figure of a political leader who is a descendant of the Davidic dynasty.[xiii] In fact, the very term *messiah*, meaning "savior" or "anointed one," comes from the term used to describe the anointing of the kings of Israel. This is an important distinction from classic utopian writing. As one utopian literary analyst understood, "[Messianism] requires pulling everybody into the scheme of a leader. Whereas utopianism basically consists in co-opting people to build things together."[xiv] For many utopian writers (especially those of socialist utopias), government was the evil that needed to be eradicated, and humanity could never be happy until all political authority and institutions disappeared. This is a fascinating contrast similar to the first point about a God-centered society. Isaiah insists that humanity must follow a central political leader in order to achieve order out of chaos. Of course, in order for this to actually function, the leader must be pure of heart and mind, and of great moral and spiritual strength, but prophetic messianism suggests that a social order without a central mortal power (in addition to the central Godly power) is doomed to fail.

Why is this so? It seems antithetical to the idea of the idealism of the messianic era as a period in which pride and the power hungry nature of humanity have been defeated. Isn't the requirement of a king an invitation to corruption—especially considering the fact that the pitfalls of human pride, ego, and the corruption of power are major themes of prophetic literature?[xv] Perhaps, like the need for a belief in a divine power external to humanity, it is also necessary to have a human representation of that control. In the view of the prophets, it is probable that in any democratic community of human beings, a desire for individual power will destroy any group dynamic (again, think of Orwell's critique). To be sure, the dangers of an authority figure are clearly espoused by the prophets as well,[xvi] yet they maintain belief that human beings require a firm model of corporeal leadership in order to attain social, political, and religious good. It is not the theocentric prophet who will rule during the messianic era, but the anthropocentric king, meant to implement political rule in an earthly domain.

In halakhic reality and history, we find this specifically in the ideology of the rabbinical figure. The model of top-down halakhic decision making is still quite central to the realization of religious perfectibility. Interestingly, both utopian works (in their quest to rid the world of government) and messianic works (in requiring central government to perfect the world) are positing a world in which human nature itself does not change, but simply finds greater success in its struggle to be good. For utopians, humankind has the ability to strive toward perfectibility and is essentially good; humankind has just been held back by corrupt authority figures. In the messianic world, humans will always struggle between good and evil but the "good option" will be clearer (at least according to Maimonides). Therefore, a central political system is always necessary to maintain order. In neither world does the actual essence of humanity change in a significant way.

This brings us to our third point—that prophetic messianism is unique in its focus on a national history and fulfillment of a destiny. Prophetic messianism can never be understood as merely a social revolution in the way that some utopian works can be read. One important reason for this is its emphasis on the return to a national homeland; messianism is bound to an important historical and religious geographic location. Indeed, the messianic vision is dependent on the return to the land. While utopias, by their very definition ("no place") are aterritorial, preferring to remain social commentaries on human characteristics, motivations, and realities, prophetic messianism ties itself to a specific historical location. In addition, many aspects of prophetic messianism rely on a vision of the past in the construction of the future.[xvii] Most utopian works are set in the future because

they are about where we are going rather than how we got to where we are. Prophetic messianism prefers to tie our future "utopia" to remembrances and constructs of the past; a historically significant land, a dynastic king, a rebuilt Temple, a promise fulfilled and a national mission finally come to fruition. Why is that? Perhaps messianic vision is connected to a historical reality and memory because the prophets understood that a mission must rely on a greater narrative and history in order for the dream to feel tangible, powerful, and achievable. The biblical idea of "*zikharon*" or shared, collective memory, is the guidepost that will drive how a community works together to achieve the desired future. In contrast, utopias are sometimes criticized for being anti-nationalist in that they "laugh at the collapse of the Western world" and its heritage.[xviii] Thomas More himself probes at this theme in *Utopia* when he mocks those who fall back on the argument of tradition in order to justify weak character:

Failing all else, their last resort will be: "This was good enough for our ancestors, and who are we to question their wisdom?" Then they'll settle back in their chairs, with an air of having said the last word on the subject—as if it would be a major disaster for anyone to be caught being wiser than his ancestors!

Unlike the historical dependency of prophetic messianism, More focuses on a break from the past as an element of building Utopia by placing it on an island that the founder of Utopia has cut off from the rest of humankind. His world can only work if it is removed from the rest of humanity.

Sargent suggests that "all utopias are fictions of a particular type."[xix] However, by focusing on a historical reality and on an actual land, we are reminded that prophetic utopia *is* an actual place that exists and therefore is one that we can visit, settle, and develop. And like the concrete, material nature of a geographical reality, the social reality should feel tangible and achievable as well.[xx] *Because of these elements, messianic literature does not have the same "fictive" texture that is characteristic of utopian literature.*

This concretizing of the messianic universe can also be characterized as the difference between "horizontal concerns" and "vertical concerns."[xxi] Horizontal concerns are those concerns that relate to the world around us, that occur within history and time, whereas vertical concerns relate to a world with a focus outside of our tangible reach, like the Jewish tradition of the World to Come[xxii] or Christianity's Kingdom of Heaven. Prophetic messianism as it is presented in the text of Isaiah is a horizontal concern. It does not involve heavenly beings or non-corporeal entities; rather, it includes a king, a land, and a political vision. The context of Isaiah's work also argues that messianism should be an attitude of

doing, rather than an attitude of waiting.[xxiii] He shaped these visions during a period in which the Southern community of Judea watched as their Northern brothers disappeared into Assyrian exile. True, his messianism may have functioned as a form of comfort to the Judean survivors, but Isaiah is also warning his audience that if they don't seek the messianic world through productive change, they will follow the same path to destruction.[xxiv] Utopian authors, on the other hand, though they criticize a society's ills, describe an imaginary state and are often criticized for "simply describing the society without indicating how that society *was or could be achieved.*"[xxv]

What about the idea of catastrophic or apocalyptic messianism, then? If the messianic ideal is a horizontal concern, obtained through a tangible human focus on progress and perfectibility, then what of the tradition that the Messiah will arrive only after, or via, a great apocalyptic event such as a violent war or globally destructive incident? Does our tradition not also contain the belief that redemption will come via a powerful external agent and apocalyptic event representing the mighty hand of God? This tradition is harder to find in the prophecies of Isaiah but seems to be more clearly present in those of Daniel and Ezekiel.[xxvi] Perhaps this is why medieval thinkers made the case that apocalyptic messianism is but one choice, and that of a last resort; that God will intervene to pull humanity into utopia, but only if humanity can find absolutely no path by which to get there themselves. Indeed, it is not an ideal redemption. We see this in the understanding of the messianic prophecy: "The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly" (Isaiah 60:22). How does one understand the timing of the messianic arrival? Will it occur "in its time," in the right moment when it is appropriately achieved, or will it transpire "swiftly"? Perhaps the two can be reconciled, but Rashi points out that "in its time" refers to a situation in which the Jewish nation is not worthy of redemption. At that point, if we are unsuccessful in shaping a world that reflects the messianic ideals, then we will see it come about apocalyptically. However, if we are worthy of it, if we take the first steps down the road ourselves, then God promises to "accelerate" the end so that we'll float over the finish line by His hand. He will ensure that any elements that stand in our way disappear, but the work will have been done by humanity. The outcome based on exertion and worthiness is the preferred mode of messianic redemption. In addition, it is important to keep in mind while reading the more apocalyptic sounding prophecies of Daniel, that all of them are couched in the language of political conflict and dominion, and interpreting them demands a broad knowledge of history and the rise and fall of nations. Likewise, the millenarian calculations that Daniel discusses utilize prophetic imagery and numerology but

are clothed in the language of political narratives. For example, Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in Daniel Chapters 2, 7, and 11 can all be understood as prophetic language channeled through the prism of the rise and fall of nations.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that the messianic era is not a "happily ever after." Maimonides notes that human beings will still function with free will and may choose to use it in a harmful way. However, this will be tempered by additional elements of clarity in seeking and understanding truth so that it will be easier to use that free will in a productive way. Maimonides adds that the messianic world will make it easier for humanity to attain the World to Come, but does not ensure it. The utopian genre, for many critics, is also one that is not an all-encompassing panacea. Sargent argues that perfection is actually not a characteristic of the utopian fiction; even in More's Utopia, life is not perfect. Utopias are more about how they represent humanity's evolution in community relations than they are about ultimate bliss. They need not necessarily be perfect, just "more perfect" than the current world.

One final note: Prophetic messianism, and the historical messianic movements it inspired, has seen its fair share of suspicion and criticism. Messianism has justifiably been accused of spinning fantasies in the imaginations of desperate audiences and of offering a passive mode of optimism, idealism, and empty hope in place of constructive advice and guidance. In a strong critique of Isaac Abravanel's messianic commentary on the book of Daniel, Benzion Netanyahu epitomizes this criticism when he claims that messianism involves being

> …rich in speculative fantasy. When [the men of the Middle Ages] considered the Bible, they gave their imagination the freest possible rein, and they used the ancient references, not to reconstruct the historical past, but to build their theoretical castles in the air. . . . messianic doctrine reflects the tragedy of the Jewish messianic movements…the tragedy of a people who built castles in the air, who breathed the atmosphere of dreams, rather than reality.[xxvii]

It is has been observed of the utopian construct as well that it is at best a fictional enterprise, and at worst, "a subversive avoidance of humanity's current conditions and needs."[xxviii] Literary analysts point out that while utopias might be tools for social change, they also tend to gloss over current realities; "ideology" can be both constructive and a "wholly negative concept."[xxix]

While there is justifiable basis to both of these claims, I would venture to suggest that when it comes to prophetic messianism, the fantastical surface of the messianic words were always accompanied by realistic social criticism. The prophets never lost themselves in wistful dreaming, but accompanied it with hard advice that structured their offer of utopian future. In their words, we should see not just a “reconstruction of the historical past” in the thrill of a projected future, and not even just the theology of faith in human progress, but a form of national calling and expectation. It is a philosophy that should force us to acknowledge that perhaps, at the end of the day (pun intended), utopianism can be seen as an interesting example of a secular, modern expression of prophetic messianism, meant to challenge our assumptions, shape our philosophies and interactions and gently push us toward social and religious honesty and perfectibility. The *navi* proclaims the divine summons, and it is up to each of us, both individually and as a community, to seek out where and how we will answer his call.

[i] Weingrad, Michael. “Why There Is No Jewish Narnia.” *Jewish Review of Books* Spring 2010.

[ii] Sargent, Lyman Tower. “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited.” *Utopian Studies* 5:1 (1994), pp. 1–37.

[iii] Along these lines, Sargent quotes French novelist Anatole France in describing utopian writing as “Out of generous dreams come beneficial realities” (*Ibid*., p. 5).

[iv] Dystopian writing is really of the same genre of social criticism as utopian writing. Dystopias exaggerate the worst parts of society, whereas utopias ask what the world would look like without them. (Sargent [see note 2] calls the dystopia a type of “jeremiad”—from the style of critical rhetoric of Jeremiah—which details how you will be punished if you continue with certain behaviors.) Indeed, *neviim* paint a similar picture; they present the world as it would look without improvement as a counter to the messianic prophecies. From an educational perspective, how and when each method is used is a fascinating question. For instance, Isaiah Chapter 1 is a scathing critique of the nation’s ethical behavior, and verses like “your land is desolate, your cities burnt with fire”

(1:7) are the picture of the dystopian outcome. For other “dystopian” examples, see Isaiah 6:11–12, Jeremiah 4:19–28 and Jeremiah 8:1–2.

[v] Isaiah 2:4. See also Ezekiel 39:9.

[vi] Isaiah 2:2–3 “And it shall be at the end of the days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be firmly established at the top of the mountains, and it shall be raised above the hills, and all the nations shall stream to it.…” See also Zephaniah 3:9 and Isaiah 2:17.

[vii] Isaiah 2:7–8.

[viii] Many utopian writings also focused on the rejection of the superficiality of money and specifically, silver, and gold. This rejection is also symbolized in the pure, idyllic, pastoral portrayal of the return to nature and the natural. “[The Utopians] marvel that any mortal can take pleasure in the weak sparkle of a little gem or bright pebble, when he has a star, or the sun itself, to look at.” The biblical imagery of the messianic world also focuses extensively on natural, agricultural, and pastoral constructs.

[ix] See note 3.

[x] Bury, J. B. *The Idea of Progress*. London: The Macmillan Company, 1920, Introduction.

[xi] *Ibid*., 10–11.

[xii] In contrast, a bygone utopia like the Garden of Eden is one that is attained without human effort and is eventually (or maybe as a result of its status as a divine “gift”) untenable.

[xiii] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the complexities of the Bible’s view of monarchy, but it is clear that despite its ambiguity toward power and its abuses, biblical messianism requires a central political leadership figure.

[xiv] Interview with Daniel Bell, American sociologist and author of *The End of Ideology* at http://www.the-utopian.org/tagged/Daniel_Bell/

[xv] Examples within messianic prophecies include Isaiah 2:17 and 25:11–12. Of course, this is a ubiquitous prophetic theme. In addition to the critique of pride in general, much of the relationship between the prophet and the king in ancient Judea focused on the former's critique of the latter's abuse of power. (See for example, the narratives of II Samuel 12, I Kings 21, and II Chronicles 26.)

[xvi] As I mentioned, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the biblical perspective on monarchy, but it is clear that despite a very suspicious view of kingship, prophetic messianism sees the "*melekh haMashiah*" as a central figure of the End of Days.

[xvii] See for example, Isaiah 1:26.

[xviii] Sargent, *Three Faces,* 8.

[xix] *Ibid.,* 22.

[xx] Interestingly, in his recent book *The Road to Character*, New York Times columnist David Brooks suggests that one cannot create a moral sense, but that it must be inherited. The connection to our shared past, our mission etc is a focus on that belief. References like "tzedek *uMishpat*" and the *avot* all reflect that.

[xxi] Terms first used in relation to messianism by social psychologist Erich Fromm, and analyzed by Joanne and Nick Braune in the essay "Erich Fromm's Socialist Program and Prophetic Messianism." In *Reclaiming the Sane Society; Essays on Erich Fromm's Thought.* Ed. Seyed Javad Miri, Robert Lake and Tricia Kress. Boston, Sense Publishers (2015), p. 59–94. The Braunes analyze Fromm's understanding as messianism as divided into categories of "revolutionary" and "non-revolutionary," or whether the messiah will come at the endpoint of "mankind's progress toward self-realization" or at the point of "mankind's greatest corruption" (p. 71).

[xxii] The nature of the "World to Come" in Jewish thought is ambiguous and disputed. Maimonides believed that the World to Come involved immortality of the soul and was therefore different from the messianic era. According to Maimonides, the World to Come is a metaphysical kingdom—a resting place for souls alone—whereas the messianic world is one that exists in a decidedly

corporeal reality.

[xxiii] It's interesting to think about how the Jewish educational system and the differing philosophies of various Jewish sects focus on both an "attitude of waiting" as well as an "attitude of doing" in regard to messianic culture.

[xxiv] Braune, *Prophetic Messianism,* 73. The authors note that prophetic messianism is full of tensions that at first seem contradictory but actually function as a dialectic, in a form of harmony with each other. The savior comes from within but is also portrayed as an external agent. The verses emphasize universalism but with a strong focus on nationalism as well. Religious passion and tolerance go hand in hand. And isn't the very idea of utopia a study in contradiction as well? It is a place that is *ou*, or "not," but it is also *topos*, a place that is.

[xxv] *Three Faces*, 7.

[xxvi] See Daniel 11 and Ezekiel 38–39, for just two examples of many.

[xxvii] Netanyahu, B. *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher.* New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953, 102.

[xxviii] Fredric Jameson's observation at the end of his piece, "The Politics of Utopia" *New Left Review II (25). January–February 2004.*

[xxix] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, quoted in Sargent, *Three Faces,* 23.