



***Sefirat Ha'Omer*: Rambam on the Failure of Politics**

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The practice has developed to maintain certain signs of mourning during the period of *sefirat ha'omer*. We do not play or listen to music, marry, or cut our hair. These practices are related to the death of 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students, who, according to the Gemara, did not treat each other with proper respect (See Yevamot 62b and *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim*, 193).

It has been suggested that these students of Rabbi Akiva are not merely scholars of Jewish law. Rather, Rabbi Akiva was known to support the military efforts of Bar Kokhva to rebel against the Romans during the second century, and saw the short-lived period of Jewish independence under Bar Kokhva's leadership as potentially messianic (*Yerushalmi, Ta'anit* 4:8; *Eikhah Rabbah*, 2). Bar Kokhva and his troops, massacred by the Romans at the city of Beitar, are the students for whom we mourn.

In the *Mishneh Torah* Rambam does not mention the practices of mourning during *sefirat ha'omer*, and therefore has nothing to say about the students of Rabbi Akiva or Bar Kokhva in that context. But Rambam does mention Bar Kokhva in other contexts, which allows us to offer a different interpretation of the figure and the practices of mourning that have developed. The Gemara states that Rabbi Akiva's students died "because they did not treat each other with respect." It would seem, then, that the lesson of the mourning requires a personal reflection on treating others kindly. Without rejecting that interpretation, I would like to suggest that Rambam's treatment of Bar Kokhva asks us also to reflect on the search for political and military perfection, and the inevitable failures of politics in *olam hazeh*.

In order to understand this suggestion, we must first take a detour into Rambam's theory of the Messianic age, and its connection to his vision of Jewish political leadership and monarchy. As is well known, Rambam's approach to the Messiah contrasts with the position of Maharal and others, who understand that the messianic age will radically transform the nature of things, altering the whole physical world and the human condition (see in particular the second half of *Netzah Yisrael*). Instead, Rambam believes that "*olam keminhago noheg*," the world will continue along its natural course. There will continue to be death, relative poverty, struggle and temptation, albeit on a smaller scale. The necessities of life will be more easily available; peace will reign; and Israel will be freed from the subjugation of the persecuting nations. The relative ease with which material and political security will be available will enable individuals and the community as a whole to maximize their potential in the study of Torah, keeping of the commandments, and learning what is humanely knowable about God (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:1-2).

This realism is reflected in Rambam's image of the figure of the Messiah himself. He need not perform miracles, need not revive the dead, need not produce supernatural wonders (11:3). Instead, his task is to study Torah and perform *mitzvot*, encourage others to do likewise, win wars, build the Temple, and gather the exiles (11:4). That is to say, Rambam views the messianic age as a utopia, but a modest utopia, one in which we will achieve much

more smoothly what we are already trying to achieve in this world, prior to the arrival of the Messiah.

The modesty in Rambam's suggestion raises an interesting question. How do I know when the world has made the transition between the real world of today and the utopian world of the Messiah? If problems and challenges will continue to exist into the messianic future, where exactly is the line between today and tomorrow, reality and utopia? If the Rambam's naturalism and realism brings makes the Messianic age look closer to what I see around myself today, what, precisely is the difference between the real and the ideal?

For Maharal, these questions hardly arise. I know that the messiah has arrived because of dramatic miracles, the revival of the dead, and the transformation of the very stuff of the physical world. The change is cataclysmic, so it is easy to identify. But Rambam's modest messianism asks those humans who live through history and who live through messianic times to identify for themselves when the transition from ideal to real has occurred.¹ It is for this reason that Rambam provides identifiable criteria for determining whether an individual is or is not the messiah "If there arises a king from the House of David, learned in Torah and involved in *mitzvot* like David his father, according to the written and oral Torah, and he forces all of Israel to follow it [the Torah] and strengthen themselves in it, and he fights the wars of the Lord, he is assumed to be the Messiah. And if he acts and succeeds and builds the Temple in its place, and gathers in the exiles, then he is certainly the messiah [*Hilkhoh Melakhim* 11:4]. Human beings will have to look around at the political, military, and spiritual reality around them, and try to determine if the current king has messianic potential, is assumed to be the messiah, or is certainly the messiah.

This question about the difficulty in determining when exactly the Messianic standard has been met is made more severe when we realize that Rambam is very careful in his writings not to make black-and-white distinctions between good and bad kings or political leaders. His political realism is reflected not only in his vision of the Messiah, but in his description of Jewish kings and political leaders through the ages.

There are, according to Rambam, a range of legitimate kings and political leaders, spanning the least ideal to the most ideal. All of these Jewish political leaders exist on a continuum between ideal and real. But, when they fail to live up to the ideal, they do not become illegitimate.

According to Rambam, Jewish monarchy did not begin and end with the Biblical kings. The office began earlier and continued later. On the one hand, Rambam codifies that the *mitzvah* to appoint a king begins upon entrance into the Land of Israel (*Hilkhoh Melakhim* 1:1; *Sefer HaMitzvot, Aseh* 173). Yet, Rambam also explains that Moses, who never entered the Land, was a king (*Hilkhoh Beit HaBehirah* 6:11). The ideal Jewish king is a son of the house of David, but non-Davidic kings are, according to Rambam, legitimate, even if not ideal (*Hilkhoh Melakhim* 1:9). Despite their numerous failings, and their lack of Davidic ancestry, Rambam considers the priestly Hasmoneans to be legitimate kings. The Hasmoneans, after defeating the Greeks, "Set up a king from among the priests, and *the monarchy returned to Israel for more than two hundred years* – until the destruction of the second Temple" (*Hilkhoh Hannukah* 3:1, emphasis mine). The particularly remarkable thing about this passage is that Rambam claims that even such Roman appointed governors who ruled the Land of Israel up until the destruction of the Temple, such as Herod (hardly a religious and political hero, by virtually any standard) qualify as legitimate, if not ideal, Jewish kings.

¹ For interesting reflections on this paradox, see David Berger "Al Tozte'otehah HaIroniot Shel Gishato HaRatzionalistit Shel HaRambam LeTeqfah HaMeshihit," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1992), 1-8.

Rambam also makes it clear that Jewish leaders outside the land of Israel, even if they cannot be referred to as kings, gain their legitimacy from their approximation to kings. “The Exilarchs in Babylonia stand in place of the king. They exercise authority over Israel everywhere... as it says, ‘The scepter shall not depart from Judah’ (Breishit 49:10): this refers to the Exilarchs of Babylon” (*Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 4:13). By quoting this verse, Rambam emphasizes the continuity between even the Diaspora Exilarchs and the ideal kings of the house of Judah and David.²

That is to say, Jewish political leadership need not be ideal and perfect to be legitimate. Perfection is not the prerequisite for monarchy. Only the Messiah is an ideal king. Put somewhat differently, a regular king and the messianic king share the same ideal goals and desires. The things that Rambam lists as criteria for becoming messiah are things that ought to be on the agenda of any Jewish king, and by extension any Jewish political leader. Every Jewish leader should lead the people of Israel to proper study of Torah and observance of mitzvot. Fighting and winning wars is part and parcel of the task of even non-Davidic and non-Messianic kings; after all, the title of the section of the *Mishneh Torah* relating to kings is “The Laws of Kings *and their Wars*.” What king would not want to achieve economic and military stability? The rebuilding of the Temple is, according to Rambam, a positive commandment that applies through every generation. That is to say, the only difference between a king and the messiah is that the messiah succeeds whereas a regular king can be plotted somewhere else along the continuum between real and ideal.

Here is where the figure of Bar Kokhva comes in. Rambam describes Bar Kokhva, famous only for his short-lived and ultimately disastrous rebellion against Rome, as a Jewish king. Among the tragedies that occurred to Jews on the Ninth of Av was the failure of the Beitar revolt, led by Bar Kokhva, “the great king” (*Hilkhot Ta’anit* 5:3). Rambam also mentions Bar Kokhva in the context of discussion the Messiah, and in particular the question of how one determines if a real, but not ideal king, qualifies as the messiah. Bar Kokhva is historical proof that the messiah need not perform miracles or radically transform the world, since Rabbi Akiva acknowledged Bar Kokhva as a likely Messianic king despite the general’s lack of miraculous success, indeed despite the latter’s only tentative victories on the battlefield. Rabbi Akiva, according to Rambam’s reading, is searching for signs of Jewish kingship everywhere it might be found, however tentatively, and is always asking how close that realistic, worldly, historical leader is from the ideal, messianic, utopian leader.

Yet, Rabbi Akiva was doomed to be disappointed, in that Bar Kokhva failed. Bar Kokhva began to travel down the messianic path, but his rebellion and leadership failed (with catastrophic historical results), and Bar Kokhva was killed. “Do not think that the king Messiah need perform miracles.... That is not so. For Rabbi Akiva was one of the great Sages of the Mishnah, and he was the arms bearer of Ben Koziba [Bar Kokhva] the king, and he claimed that he was the Messiah. He [R. Akiva] and the scholars of his generation all imagined that he was the Messiah, until he was killed due to his sins. Once he was killed, they understood that he was not the Messiah” (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:3). Bar Kokhva’s real-worldly and historical failure is the proof that he is not the messiah.

This allows us to suggest an alternative meaning behind the practices of mourning during *sefirat ha’omer*. If we identify the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva as Bar Kokhva and his soldiers, then their death symbolizes not merely a local failure in interpersonal relations, but the inherent flaws in pre-messianic politics. If the only difference between the messianic king and historical kings and political leaders is that the messianic king succeeds, then we are doomed, prior to the coming of the messiah, to a world of complex and imperfect politics.

² For a more expansive discussion of the relationship between ideal and real kings in Rambam’s thought, see Ya’akov Blidstein, *Eqronot Medini’im BeMishnat HaRambam* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1983).

We have neither the right to self-righteously de-legitimize our current political leaders, as flawed as they may be, for their failings. Nor do we have the luxury of forgiving them for their human flaws. On the one hand, we understand that in historical time, politics remains legitimate *despite* its failings and inadequacies. On the other hand – like Rabbi Akiva’s hopes for Bar Kokhva – we must always be looking and working toward the improvement of that politics, toward the ever-present possibility that just around the corner lies success, lies the overcoming of the flaws of history, lies perfection. We mourn during the period of *sefirat ha’omer* because of how often in history our political and military hopes have come close to the ideal, but only close. We mourn because, despite our best efforts, we have only succeeded in improving the world of politics and power, but have not succeeded in perfecting it. During *sefirat ha’omer* we emphasize the paradox expressed in the Mishnah: “The task is not yours to complete; nor are you free to desist from it” (*Avot* 2:16).