

APOCALYPSE NOW AND AGAIN: A Jewish Perspective

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“May the wind be sucked from the lungs of any who dares calculate the End of Days.” Uttering this ominous curse, the 3rd Century Sage Samuel weighed into the fight against apocalyptic, end-of-the-world ideologies among his people, the Jews. Samuel and the other Sages (50 BCE – 600CE) had good reason for their anti-apocalyptic stance. Throughout the 1st and 2nd centuries of the Common Era, apocalyptic movements had cut a swathe of destruction through the Jewish world, even consuming great luminaries among the Sages themselves. So what is this phenomenon of Apocalypse, and what about it sparked such ire in Samuel?

I think a Jewish perspective is useful here at dawn of the new millennium. Though Jews assign no great significance to the coming millennium of the Western calendar (it is, after all, the year 5761 by our calculation, with the next millennium for us a good 240 years off), now seems be a good time to share Jewish apocalyptic experiences with our non-Jewish neighbors. With 3500 years of experience behind us, we bring what can best be described as a “long view” to the topic.

The word “apocalypse” (lit: “uncover”) is Greek, but the concept is distinctly Jewish. In its narrowest sense, it refers to a Divine revelation about the future of Israel and the world. In its broader sense it is the report of a particular spiritual vision. The visionary (usually a figure who merits passing mention in the Bible) describes in highly symbolic language the miraculous End of Days, the afterlife, angelic and demonic forces. A literature of Apocalypse starts to appear just as the institution of Hebrew prophecy is winding down (>500 BCE). It makes some well-known appearances in the Hebrew Bible (*Zechariah*, *Daniel*) and continues on in a long series of non-canonical writings (such as *Ezra Apocalypse* and the *Book of Enoch*). Eventually Judaism bequeathed this durable literary form with its highly fungible symbols to Gnosticism, Christianity and Islam, each of which developed their own apocalyptic visionaries and texts.

Key to the on-going popularity of apocalyptic literature is its potent sense of immediacy and urgency. Burdened by their contemporary world and powerfully attuned to cosmic forces moving around them, these visionaries know the End of Days is upon them. It is easy for us to share the apocalyptic writers’ sense of dissatisfaction with the present. We are also drawn to the absolute sense of history found in such visions. All the messiness of complex motives, all the untidiness of our time, is reduced to a fundamental moral/spiritual struggle between Good and Evil. More important, perhaps, is that Apocalypse is a hopeful ideology. It offers the ultimate Reformation, promising those who commit to its cause hope, rejuvenation, and resolution of the most perplexing human problems.

Unfortunately, in the effort to “stand right” with such a radical vision, those who embrace Apocalypse must themselves become radicals. Utter devotion to principle prevents compromise, purity of vision obscures self-critique. Extreme approaches to human institutions such as family, economics, and politics become the norm. Especially in the case of the latter, violence is often seen as a valid, even valorous, tool of redemption. Historically this has meant that apocalyptic movements fail to yield the progressive ends they envision. Its constructive potential becomes overwhelmed by its own destructive impulses. As a result Apocalypse has become synonymous with disaster.

No one was more aware of this than the Sages, who were both the primary inheritors and the interpreters of Jewish apocalyptic writings. So many were the tragedies associated with trying to “force the hand of God” that the Sages, Samuel foremost among them, sought to counter its influence. Besides curses, Samuel also reinterpreted apocalyptic expectations in Jewish Messianism. He taught, “The only difference between this era and the era of the Messiah is the [political] subjection of Israel.” The medieval philosopher Maimonides later expanded this idea into a comprehensive, naturalistic, anti-miraculous concept of Messianism. Thus, in the main, Judaism has discouraged pursuit of Apocalypse.

In the main, but not entirely. Though none has yet to achieve its aim, apocalyptic movements continue to flare up throughout Jewish history. Periods of great upheaval have been particularly favorable times for messianic and apocalyptic groups to surface. In our own time there have been two significant Jewish apocalyptic excitements. The first of these has been the apocalyptic ideology of Rav Yehudah Zvi Kook and his followers, which first took root in Israel following the decisive and unexpected Israeli victory in the 1967 war. Rav Yehudah transformed the deeply messianic but more tolerant teachings of his father, Rav Abraham Isaak, into a militant belief that the Jewish people can initiate the messianic era through total reclamation of the land of Israel from the hands of gentiles, by whatever means necessary. Devotees of the Rav Kook, sometimes referred to as *Gush Emunim* (Bloc of the Faithful, an appropriately Apocalyptic moniker), have been among the most violent and uncompromising participants in the “settlers movement” in the West Bank.

The other Jewish apocalyptic ideology of our time is centered here in America. It has flourished in the *CHaBaD* (a Hebrew acronym for wisdom, insight, and knowledge) movement, an ultra-pious sect of Judaism. Chabadniks saw apocalyptic implications when their seventh *rebbe* (A *rebbe* is a charismatic spiritual teacher), Menachem Mendel Schneerson, began to preach that the Messiah was already in their midst and only needed the right conditions to reveal himself. Many understood that Rabbi Schneerson was referring to himself, and CHaBaD launched into a frenzied campaign of bringing that revelation to pass. According to the Rebbe, the simple means to achieve this was to bring all Jews closer to the practices of Orthodox Judaism. The consequences of this have mostly ranged from innocuous to the positive, with Chabadniks spreading out over the Jewish world in a missionary effort to encourage greater piety and devotion to God and Torah. Less positive have been *CHaBaD*’s forays into politics, where the polarizing nature of its absolutist ideology has driven Jews apart in America and exacerbates a simmering culture-war between Orthodox and more secularized Jews in Israel.

The CHaBaD movement achieved its high-water mark in 1993, but that year the Octogenarian Rabbi Schneerson suffered a devastating stroke. He died a few years later, helpless as an unseemly power struggle raged among his inner-circle. Since that time *CHaBaD* has survived by redefining, though by no means discarding, its messianic confidence in the late Rebbe.

The future of the apocalyptic settlers movement is in even greater flux. Despite the return to violence of late, Israeli opinion continues to favor accommodation rather than confrontation with the Palestinians. Certainly the viability of settlements isolated from Israeli territory and surrounded by a Palestinian entity is seriously in question. This apocalyptic vision may also be destined to fall to Samuel’s curse. Still, those who religiously believe in the salvific need for a “Greater Israel” remain a volatile and potent force in Israel culture and politics -- the apocalyptic vigor of Rav Yehudah’s vision is not yet spent. All of which only serves to remind those of us with more compromising souls that the potential for doing harm in the name of ultimate Good will not end when the Millennium does. Such are the challenges for those of us who do not know that Apocalypse is *now*. Still, history seems to favor those who can take the long view.