

Rav Kook Torah



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I Have an Ox and a Donkey

Upon his return to Eretz Yisrael, Yaakov sent a message to his brother Eisav: “I have an ox and a donkey” (B'reishit 31:6). Why was it necessary to tell Eisav about this ox and donkey?

According to the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 75), Yaakov was not speaking about the material possessions he had amassed, but about something of far greater significance. The ox refers to Mashiach ben Yosef, the precursive Messianic leader descended from Yosef. The ox is a symbol of the tribe of Yosef; both Yaakov and Moshe used the imagery of an ox when blessing Yosef (B'reishit 49:6, D'varim 33:17).

And the donkey? That is a reference to Mashiach ben David, the ultimate Messianic king descended from David, who will arrive as “a pauper riding on a donkey” (Zecharya 9:9).

Why do we need two Messianic leaders? And why are they represented specifically by these two animals?

Two Forces

In a remarkable eulogy entitled “The Eulogy in Jerusalem”, delivered after Theodore Herzl’s death in 1904, Rav Kook explained this concept of two Mashiachs. The eulogy beautifully articulates his views on the secular Zionist movement and the tragic rift between the religious and secular sectors of the Jewish people.

God created us with both body and soul. We have forces that maintain and strengthen the body, and forces that protect and develop the soul. The ideal is to have a robust body together with a strong and healthy soul. The soul, with its remarkable faculties, is meant to utilize the body to fulfill God’s will in this world.

The Jewish people function in an analogous fashion to the body and soul. There are forces within the nation that correspond to the body, working to meet its material and physical needs. These forces prepare a firm basis for Israel’s holy mission. And there are forces in the nation that work directly toward developing Israel’s special spiritual qualities.

Efforts to promote public security and welfare are common to all nations, just as all creatures have bodily and physical functions. But the higher aspect of furthering our spiritual aspirations on the national level is unique to the Jewish people –

“It is a nation dwelling alone, not counted among the other nations” (Bamidbar 23:9).

Yosef and Yehuda

These two tasks were divided between two tribes, Yosef and Yehuda. Yosef looked after the material needs of the Israelites in Egypt. The Sages taught that Yosef spoke seventy languages, thus indicating that his task was a universal one, common to all nations. He protected the Jewish people in Egypt, and is described as “the opposing force to Eisav” (B'reishit Rabba), defending the nation against those who attack the Jewish people.

Yehuda, on the other hand, was responsible for cultivating the special holiness of the Jewish people. “Yehuda became His holy nation” (T'hilim 114:2).

Ultimately, both of these aspects were to be combined in the Davidic monarchy. David was a warrior who fought the enemies of Israel and brought peace to the nation. But he was also the “sweet singer of Israel”, the psalmist who would rise at midnight to compose holy poems praising God.

The Split

When Yorov-am led the northern tribes of Yosef to split from the southern kingdom of Yehuda, he

introduced a tragic divide between these two forces, the material and the spiritual. The Midrash says that God grabbed Yorov-am by the coat and told him: “If you repent, I and you and [David] the son of Yishai will walk together in the Garden of Eden.” Together, you and the Davidic monarch will nurture the Jewish people and enable them to accomplish their Divine mission.

Yorov-am's reply, however, was: “Who will lead?”

God answered, “The son of Yishai will lead.”

Yorov-am refused to recognize the pre-eminence of the nation's spiritual mission. Throughout history, we have witnessed the ongoing conflict between these two forces: secular movements that work towards improving the nation's material lot, and religious ones that promote its spiritual nature exclusively.

The redemption of the Jewish people can only be attained when both of these forces are functioning. Those who work towards strengthening the nation's spiritual aspects are preparing for Mashiach ben David, who personifies the ultimate goal of the nation. This spiritual goal, however, cannot be attained without the necessary material foundations. All efforts to better the material conditions of the nation are part of Mashiach ben Yosef's mission.

The Fall of Mashiach ben Yosef

The Talmud in Sukka 52a teaches that Mashiach ben Yosef will be killed, and that a “great eulogy in Jerusalem” (Zecharya 12:13) will be delivered at his death. What is the significance of this piercing eulogy, when the nation will mourn the loss of Mashiach ben Yosef “as one mourns for an only child”?

Due to the rift within the Jewish people, these two forces clash. Those who promote the nation’s material aspects belittle the importance of Torah and mitzvot. And those who stress the special nature of Israel reject all changes and attempts to better its material standing. This leads to rebellion against religion on one side, and anemic stagnation on the other.

With the fall of Mashiach ben Yosef, all will realize that these are not opposing movements, but forces that should work together so that material progress will form a basis for developing the unique character of the nation. This is the significance of the “great eulogy in Jerusalem”. All sectors of the nation will mourn this loss, all will recognize that it is a tragic mistake for these forces to be divided and estranged from one another.

The Ox and the Donkey

What about Yaakov’s message to Eisav? Why did he use these two animals, the ox and the donkey, to allude to the two Messianic leaders?

The ox is used to plow the ground, preparing the area to be planted. This corresponds to the mission of Mashiach ben Yosef – to defend the nation from enemies and prepare the way for the revelation of Mashiach ben David. We also see this in the fact that the Mishkan, a preparation for the Beit HaMikdash, was established in Shiloh, in the territory of Yosef, while the Temple itself was built in the inheritance of Yehuda.

The donkey, on the other hand, is used to carry produce from the field. This corresponds to the mission of Mashiach ben David, who brings the final fruit of redemption.

A Hint to Eisav

Yaakov’s message to his brother, “I have an ox and a donkey”, alluded to the future Messianic Era, a time when he will no longer fear Eisav’s enmity. We find a second hint later on. After the two brothers meet, Yaakov promises that he will visit Eisav on Mount Se’ir. The Sages wrote:

“We searched throughout the text of the Torah, but we never found that Yaakov visited Eisav on Mount Se’ir.

It could not be that Yaakov was deceiving him. So when will Yaakov go to him? This will take place in the future era, as it says, “Saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Eisav” (Ovadya 1:21).” (B'reishit Rabba 78:14)

Sapphire from the Land of Israel.

*Adapted from Shemuot HaRe'iyah
(VaYishlach 5691), quoted in Peninei*

HaRe'iyah, pp. 68-72.

“Eulogy in Jerusalem”

from Ma'amarei HaRe'iyah, pp. 94-99