

Awaiting Messianic Redemption

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“Religion,” Karl Marx claimed, “is the opiate of the masses.”

Marx appears to disdain religion. He seems to be saying that the religious idea that God will provide salvation functions as anesthesia. Rather than revolting, Marx claims that oppressed religious people calmly and patiently endure their torment, faithful that divine intervention will eventually bring that to an end.

Marx was born to originally Jewish parents who had converted to Christianity before his birth. Perhaps he was deriding Christian hope in salvation after death as an “opiate” that dissuades demoralized workers from rebelling. He might also have been describing persecuted Jews, praying for messianic redemption rather than fighting for their lives and liberty.

Marquette University professor David Papke, though, urges us to consider Marx’s full statement, which he translates as: “Religion is the opium of the people. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of our soulless conditions.”ⁱ

Now that we know what Marx **really** said, we may reevaluate his appraisal of religion, which is more nuanced than we thought. In addition to being concerned that religion might stand in the way of fighting for freedom, he understood religion as a necessary balm for oppressed people who have no hope of liberation, providing succor and solace to distressed and hopeless souls.

Professors Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, editors of the forthcoming New Reform Torah Commentary, ask us to consider our sacred scripture as a response to trauma, primarily authored by Judeans returning home after decades of painful exile in Babylon.ⁱⁱ Yes, they had been liberated from exile: The Persian king, Koresh, having conquered Babylon, permitted the Judeans to go home and rebuild their temple. However, they had been freed into an uncertain future. The Land was in ruins. Their fellow Judeans, leaderless with the ruling class exiled, had abandoned their ancestral heritage. Moreover, the returnees had permission to rebuild the Temple but not the resources to reconstruct its former glory. The return to the Zion they had left would require divine intervention.

Let’s consider the story of the exodus as if those returnees were really writing about their own predicament. Yes, Pharaoh had liberated the slaves, just as they had been freed from Babylon, permitting them to return to their Land. Still,

only after Pharaoh said they could go, the Children of Israel find themselves chased by Pharaoh's armies, pinned between the sea on one side and those who would re-enslave them on the other. Full deliverance comes only when God splits the sea.

Like those returnees from exile who wrote the Torah, our rabbinic sages created the Seder as a response to trauma. The Romans had destroyed the Temple once again, so Passover could no longer be observed with the paschal sacrifice there. Sixty-five years after the destruction, a Jewish rebellion to retake Jerusalem had ended with our people being massacred.

The rabbis therefore viewed a human attempt to bring liberation as deadly dangerous, and they didn't want their people to try that again. To make that point, Moses's name is entirely absent from the Haggadah, despite his being God's primary human agent of redemption in the version we read in Torah. The Haggadah, though, insists: "Adonai brought us out of Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents; not through a messenger, not through an intermediary or any other supernatural being, but the Holy One, blessed be God, alone." The rabbis want us to infer that God is the **only** potential source of our people's liberation.

In Karl Marx's terms, the sages and their people were living through persecution and oppression, without hope of liberating themselves. They therefore offered the healing balm of religious faith to build hope for a better future.

Nearly two millennia of diaspora followed. Yes, our people enjoyed golden ages—here for a century, there for a century—but never and nowhere consistently. More often, they wondered when the next expulsion or pogrom, or worse, would be coming. Even the limited liberation of those first exiles returning from Babylon would have been welcomed, but our dispersed and disempowered people could not save themselves.

Holocaust survivors, though, have taught us that even small acts of resistance bring morsels of emancipation. Rabbi Hugo Gryn was only a boy when he was imprisoned with his father in Auschwitz. During Chanukah, Gryn's father used their meager margarine ration in a failed attempt to use it as oil to kindle a Chanukah lamp. Then, Gryn writes, "as we dispersed and made our way back to the bunk beds, I turned not so much **to** my father, but **on** him, upset at the fiasco and bemoaning the waste of precious calories. Patiently, he taught me one of the lasting lessons of my life and ... he made my survival possible. 'Don't be so angry,' he said to me, 'you know this festival celebrated the victory of the spirit over tyranny and might. You and I have had to go once for over a week without

proper food and another time almost three days without water, but you cannot live three minutes without hope.”ⁱⁱⁱ Gryn’s father could not break them out of Auschwitz. He could not even improve their living conditions. But he could, and he did, turn to a small act of resistance to provide hope to himself and to his son.

So much in today’s world is beyond our control. You and I lack the power to bring the hostages home to Israel or to bring peace to both Israelis and Palestinians. You and I lack the power to change our federal and state leadership, whether the issue is immigrants and refugees, gender identity and gender affirming medical care, reproductive freedom, federal public service, or public education—heck even tariffs. Our Talmudic sages, though, teach us that anybody who has the capability to protest the wrongdoing of others, and fails to do so, is responsible.^{iv} Even if we imagine that redemption can come only through divine intervention, we must not let that religious faith put us to sleep.

Tomorrow night, at our Seder tables, we will open our doors to Elijah—opening the door not only to the prophet, but to the hope that a better future is possible.

In the Bible, at the end of Elijah’s life, instead of dying, he is carried into the heavens in a fiery chariot. Our sages tell us that that is so that he may return to announce that messianic redemption has arrived.

At my house, and at our congregational Seder next week, I will invite everyone to pour some of their own wine or grape juice into Elijah’s cup, symbolizing our shared responsibility to beckon Elijah and the salvation we pray that he will announce.

Our messianic hope is not an opiate. Instead, we couple our actions, our kindness to others, our resistance to an untenable and immoral present, and our performance of *mitzvot* with prayer. Let both our actions and our prayers banish the darkness, sustain our hope, and bring the future of our dreams.

Amen.

ⁱ David R. Papke, “Karl Marx on Religion,” Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog, January 20, 2015, [Karl Marx on Religion – Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog](#).

ⁱⁱ Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, Embracing Biblical Historical Context for Sacred Reading and Spiritual Growth, CCAR webinar, January 15, 2025, [Embracing Biblical Historical Context for Sacred Reading and Spiritual Growth - Central Conference of American Rabbis](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Hugo Gryn, *Chasing Shadows*, 2000, excerpt provide by Rabbi Michael Marmur, PhD.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b. Text provided by Rabbi Rachel Mikva, PhD.