Introduction

In a well-known passage of his *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, Saadya Gaon raises the question why the almighty and merciful God has not given us the everlasting happiness without imposing upon us the commandments of the revealed Law. Would not that be preferable and more beneficial to God's creatures? Of course not, argues Saadya. "For Reason judges that one who obtains some good in return for work which he has accomplished enjoys a double portion of happiness in comparison with one who has not done any work and receives what he receives as a gift of grace". Almost immediately after this remark Saadya introduces the crucial distinction between the laws of reason and the laws of revelation. He lists the laws that are commanded by reason itself and so he finds that "it would not have been fitting for the Creator" not to command us to follow them. However, there is another group, which includes the laws that cannot be justified rationally. And yet, it is at least permissible by reason that we should be ordered to obey these laws, too. It is precisely this point that Saadya illustrates with the famous micro-parable: "Reason, furthermore, permits a wise man to employ a workman for any kind of work and pay him his wages for the sole purpose of allowing him to earn something; since this is a matter which results in benefit to the workman and causes no harm to the employer". Moreover, most of the laws of revelation can be, indeed, partly justified by reason. What is clear, though, is that God is rich without man and He simply does not need us. He commands or forbids us to do certain things – some of them make sense and some only partly so – in order to have a reason to give us a reward. It is both reasonable and more enjoyable that we receive it because we have worked and not because of His grace. The divine employer, however, has no actual use for our work.

If we skip one thousand years the picture looks very different. Many of the 20th century Jewish thinkers, if not most of them, underline the fact that God does need man and that man's fulfillment of the legal commandments – or the ethical principles perceived as the heart of the Law – is identical with the fulfillment of this need. True, there are exceptions: an important

thinker like Yeshayahu Leibowitz, for instance, would deny this claim as he would like to see the fulfillment of the commandments solely as a way to ward off the danger of idolatry and to practice the unconditional worship of God. But others, from Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig to Abraham Joshua Heschel and Emmanuel Levinas, more or less explicitly suggest that the Employer is "in search of" the employee or at least that our work is, after all, of some use. Even the key 20th century champion of Orthodox Judaism, Joseph Soloveitchik, will present the fulfillment of the commandments as our way to continue the divine work of creation. Whatever the sources of this shift – be it the spread of the Lurianic kabbalah with its idea of *tikkun olam*, be it the modern stress on the individual action, with God's own activity receding to the background or evaporating completely – this seems to be a common characteristic of the contemporary Jewish thought.

Now, as the possible link with Lurianism already suggests, this characteristic is, more often than not, related to the messianic idea. In other words, our work is not only of "some" use: it is of messianic use for this world. We have a messianic power, weak or strong, and hence – messianic obligations which we fulfill by following the divine demand. What is demanded from us is the messianic action. If we accept Franz Rosenzweig's idea that the notions of creation, revelation and redemption form the triple core of Jewish thought, then we can talk of a general pattern, which may be described as follows. The action prescribed by revelation is a messianic action, for it is seen as promoting redemption of the created world which, in the non-apocalyptic brand of Jewish thought, is perceived as incomplete or, in the apocalyptic brand, as fallen and broken. Mutations of this pattern are discernible even in the work of Jewish thinkers who are already very far removed from Jewish religion proper and for whom the action to which we are obliged is certainly not identical with the fulfillment of the halakhic commandments. It is not only the messianic idea, but also the idea of messianic action – or messianic practice – that seems to be central to the contemporary Jewish thought.

If this is so, then it is most fruitful to ask a series of key questions. What is the anatomy of the messianic action itself? What kinds of action pass for messianic in the writings of contemporary thinkers rooted in Jewish tradition or using some of its elements? Is messianic action of moral, political or still different character? What notions, if any, can serve as substitutes for the idea of revelation in the structure of the messianic

action? What are the possible relations between such an action and the notions of law, justice, peace and forgiveness, but also language, time and memory? How can it be related to other models of "redemptive" action such as, e.g., the psychoanalytic or revolutionary practice? These questions are obviously linked to more general ones concerning the messianic idea itself, its political and ethical dimension, its temporal structure, its use for the contemporary thought and the possibility of its transpositions beyond the framework of Jewish religion. It is some of these questions that the essays collected in the present issue of *Bamidbar* attempt to address.

The volume opens with Gérard Bensussan's analysis of the possible meanings of messianism, which actually extends into a meditation on the relevance of the messianic idea for our times. He begins by listing the common uses of the term "messianism" in public discourse. These are certainly imprecise, but there is a more stable meaning behind them, namely the understanding of messianism as an objective historical and political teleology. Bensussan argues that such messianism is, in fact, contrary to the Jewish messianic idea, as the former implies a vision of historical continuity and a goal immanent to the secularized historical process, while the latter stresses the possibility of, and the need for, disruption of historical continuity and so it implies the centrality of a Nietzschean extra-historical or even historiophobic force. Bensussan illustrates his point by analyzing crucial passages from Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* and then goes on to show that such an understanding of the messianic (as opposed to the secular messianism) is a common feature of contemporary Jewish thinkers such as Benjamin, Bloch, Lévinas and Derrida, regardless of the important differences between them. Bensussan argues that messianic sensibility implies both the awareness that every moment can be seen as the possible place of disruption and an ethical call for justice, a need for immediate messianic action. This demand springs precisely from an estrangement from history, an awareness that historical and political processes cannot be left to their own devices, but must be constantly disrupted by our action. Just as, on the theoretical level, the messianic should be seen as a deconstructive projectile, which constantly disrupts the edifice of philosophy.

Bensussan's argument is extended by Andrea Cassatella's paper "Normativity without Telos" which focuses on the messianic in the thought of Jacques Derrida and especially on its political dimension. On the basis of *Specters of Marx* and other crucial texts, Cassatella analyzes what he

identifies as the two moments of the messianic in Derrida, i.e. its temporal dimension and its ethico-political aspect. First, he presents the temporal experience characteristic for the Derridean messianic: the openness of time to the future without any horizon of expectation and the non-teleological nature of the promise. Derrida not only attempts to avoid any idea of historical telos that might be seen as the future presence, but he also goes beyond the clear distinction between presence and absence in his thinking about the present moment itself. Derridean time is "out of joint": we are haunted by the specters of the past, which appear in the present, but not as presence and so they make it impossible to grasp well-defined temporal units or a historical telos. Spectralization of time is clearly linked to the second crucial moment of the messianic, i.e. its ethico-political dimension. The originary violence involved in establishing any legal order, argues Cassatella, is the source of the messianic demand for justice, as the repressed specters of the dead come back to question the established order. Deconstruction is about acknowledging this demand. By analyzing some aspects of Derrida's understanding of language and archives, Cassatella puts particular stress on the fact that, for Derrida, justice is always historically situated in a contingently established order. More importantly, he pays special attention to the fact that although the idea of messianic justice reveals the key normative dimension of deconstruction, it does not introduce any traditional vision of transcendence, nor does it add any teleological horizon to Derrida's vision of time. This leads Cassatella to the claim that although the call for urgent, just action lies at the heart of Derrida's project, one should not talk of "messianic action" in his thought – if this phrase is to suggest an action striving to implement some messianic end. Rather, Derrida would urge us to act "out of the messianic" in a free way, not structured by any teleology.

In the next paper, Vivian Liska analyzes certain aspects of the messianic in Walter Benjamin in order to show how they are used and transformed by Giorgio Agamben in his own work on messianism. Her paper is a case study in the very nature of the messianic idea and its capability for *Nachleben* in philosophy. Liska presents Agamben's novel reading and transformation of Benjaminian messianism as a bold move against all modes of thinking that stress the idea of the infinite deferral (Derridean deconstruction, at least in its earlier phases, being here the most important example). This is why Agamben underlines those moments in Benjaminian messianism that point to the urgency of terminating the deferral. Liska focuses on the relationship

between messianism, narration and language in Benjamin. Referring to various texts, most notably the famous essay on the storyteller, she shows that the Benjaminian storyteller is a model of the messianic figure that is able to encompass the whole created world in his story and do justice to all singular things by calling them by their name. But if the Benjaminian messianic ideal is the fullness of a sober "prose" that encompasses all the names and thus the life of creation, then Liska also shows that Agamben's equivalent of this vision, the "idea of prose" – identified with the pure, but empty "idea of language" – simply escapes the complexities of the created world and cannot save the singular. Referring to the way both writers use Hölderlin's idea of caesura, Liska shows that in Benjamin the messianic acts of breaking the fallen continuity of the world uncover fragments and splinters of messianic fulfillment, whereas Agamben aims at a hypostasis of the break itself and tries to think "pure" interruption. Thus, his messianic machine loses its ethical effectiveness and is unable to do the messianic justice to anything.

Walter Benjamin and the idea of messianic justice reappear in the last paper of the volume, Adam Lipszyc's "The Time of The Poem", which is an attempt to find a theory of poetry conceived as messianic action in Paul Celan's *Meridian*. Beginning with the question: "When does a poem happen?" and its tentative answer: "It happens when it is read", Lipszyc turns to the Meridian speech in order to make this answer more precise. He presents the main line of Celan's argument, focusing mostly on his vision of poetry as the moment of an absurd, Utopian break – Hölderlin's caesura – in the discourse of art and the idea of the poem as a place both of self-encounter and of the encounter with the other. He finds that although Celan has only a few things to say about the temporal aspect of the poem – his comments on this topic relate to the important issue of the singular "date" to be kept in memory of the poem – he does introduce a key term *Umkehr* (conversion or reversal) which opens a whole new dimension of the problem. In order to show the full significance and the possible meanings of the term, Lipszyc traces its use in the work of Martin Buber and Walter Benjamin. *Umkehr* is identified as the equivalent of the Hebrew *teshuva*, an act of turning towards the other and – in Walter Benjamin – an act of memory. Ultimately, it is a term for (the subjective side of) messianic action, which does justice to the singular name of the other. Lipszyc combines Buber and Benjamin in order to create a context in which he reads Celan's notes to the Meridian speech, which develop the concept of

Umkehr. Thus, finally, the poem which happens in the *Jetztzeit* of reading, in the higher moment of the messianic Now, appears to be a gesture of turning toward the past dates and names (in Celan's case: the names of the Shoah's victims) in an act of the messianic, just memory.

The essays presented in this issue certainly do not answer all the questions worth being raised in this context. However, regardless of this incompleteness and all the crucial differences between the thinkers and the ideas under discussion, these papers do show certain distinctive qualities of Jewish messianic idea with its various models of messianic action. What stands out is, first, the fact that Jewish messianism stresses our involvement in the historical element, but at the same time demands some sort of estrangement from it and does not permit us to rely on historical and political mechanisms and continuities. Second, its ethical and practical character, its focus on the individual responsibility and the urge for immediate action in the presence. Third, the idea that the action demanded from us is the act of justice, which aims at saving the singularity of all that was, is or might be. In sum, there is some work to be done. Certainly, we are not able to complete the task, but we should act as if all of the work were, nevertheless, demanded from us now. Even if at least some of us do not know – or care – much about the Employer anymore.

Adam Lipszyc