

The Gemara cites a related exchange:

King Shapur said to Shmuel:<sup>[49]</sup> – אָמַר ליה שְׁבוּר מִלְכָּא לְשִׁמוּעַל – “You say that the Messiah will come on a donkey?!” – אִישְׁדָּר ליה סוּסָא בְרָקָא דְאִיתִי לִי – I will send him my finest<sup>[50]</sup> horse!<sup>[51]</sup> – אָמַר ליה [Shmuel] retorted to him: – מִי אֵית לָךְ בֵּר חִיּוֹר גּוֹוִי – “Do you have [a horse] of a hundred colors?”<sup>[52]</sup>

A third teaching from R' Yehoshua ben Levi:

R' Yehoshua ben Levi met the prophet Elijah – רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי אֶשְׁכַּח לְאַלְיָהוּ – who was standing at the entrance of the cave of R' Shimon ben Yochai.<sup>[53]</sup> – אָמַר ליה [R' Yehoshua ben Levi] asked [Elijah]: – אֶתְיָנָא לְעָלְמָא דְאַתִּי – “Will I enter the World to Come?”<sup>[54]</sup> – אָמַר ליה [Elijah] answered him: – אִם יִרְצָה אֲרוֹן – “If this Lord wishes it.”<sup>[55]</sup> – אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי – R' Yehoshua ben Levi said: – שְׁנַיִם רָאִיתִי – I saw two people, – בִּלְחֹד שְׁלֹשָׁה שְׁמַעְתִּי – but I heard the voice of three.<sup>[56]</sup> – אָמַר ליה [R' Yehoshua ben Levi] asked [Elijah]: – אֵימָת אֶתִּי מְשִׁיחַ – “When will the Messiah come?” – אָמַר ליה [Elijah] answered him: – זֵל שְׂוִילֵיהּ לְדִידֵיהּ – “Go and ask [the Messiah]

himself!” – וְהִיכָא יְתִיב – R' Yehoshua ben Levi asked: “And where is he sitting?” – אֶפְתָּחָא דְקָרְתָּא – Elijah responded: “At the gate of the city.”<sup>[57]</sup> – וּמַאי סִימְנִיהּ – R' Yehoshua ben Levi asked: “And what is his distinguishing feature?”<sup>[58]</sup> – יְתִיב בֵּינֵי – Elijah responded: “He is sitting among paupers afflicted with disease.”<sup>[59]</sup> – וְכֹלֵן שְׂרוּ וְאַסִּירֵי בְּחָד וְזִמְנָא – All of them<sup>[60]</sup> untie and tie all their bandages at the same time. – אִיהוּ שְׂרִי חָד וְאַסִּיר חָד – But he unties and ties his bandages one by one,<sup>[61]</sup> – אָמַר – for he says: – דִּילְמָא מְבַעֲנָא – I might be needed at any moment; – דְּלֹא אֵינְעֵב – therefore, I deal with my bandages in this way so that I will not be delayed.”<sup>[62]</sup> – אָנֹל לְגַבִּיהּ – [R' Yehoshua ben Levi] went to [the Messiah]. – אָמַר ליה – He said to him: – שְׁלוֹם עָלֶיךָ רַבִּי וּמוֹרִי – “Peace be upon you, my master and teacher!” – אָמַר ליה [The Messiah] said to [R' Yehoshua ben Levi]: – שְׁלוֹם עָלֶיךָ בֶּר – “Peace be upon you, son of Levi.” – לִינָא – [R' Yehoshua ben Levi] asked him: – לְאִימָת אֶתִּי מָר – “When is master coming?” – אָמַר ליה [The Messiah] answered him: – הַיּוֹם – “Today!” – אֶתְא לְגַבִּי אֲלִיהוּ – [R' Yehoshua ben Levi] went back to Elijah. – אָמַר ליה [Elijah] asked him: – מַאי – “What did he say to you?” – אָמַר ליה [R' Yehoshua

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Alternatively, it shows that the Messiah is coming in the merit of our father Abraham, about whom Scripture states (*Genesis* 22:3): *He saddled his donkey* [to obey God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac] (*Iyun Yaakov*).

*Maharal* explains that the word חֲמוֹר (donkey) is derived from חֹמֶר – raw material, which lacks final form and finish. This is the opposite of spirituality, because spirituality is the ultimate in final form and finish. One who rides an animal is seen as totally separated from it, but yet in control of it. Thus, the Messiah, as a rider of a donkey, is portrayed in complete opposition to חֹמֶר, gross physicality. He is the closest among men to pure spirituality. At the same time, he is in control of physicality – he rules it, and adapts it to its spiritual purpose.

A cloud is created from water, which has no shape of its own. [Water automatically assumes the shape of its receptacle.] Thus, a cloud too denotes raw physicality. However, a cloud differs from a donkey in that, being a heavenly body, a cloud represents physicality of a heavenly level. If the Jews are deserving, the Messiah will “ride the clouds” – an altogether more sublime level than that signified by a rider of a donkey (*Chidushei Aggados*; see *Gevuras Hashem* ch. 29 at length; see also *Rashi* to *Exodus* 4:20 and *Gur Aryeh* ibid.).

49. Several exchanges between Shmuel and Shapur [Shapur I, king of Persia, 241-272 C.E.] are recorded in the Talmud (e.g. *Berachos* 56a).

50. An alternative version of the text reads בְּרָקָא, tested. According to this version, the reference is to a horse that has been tested and found to be fast (*Rashi*).

51. Shapur was poking fun: It does not behoove the exalted Messiah to ride a donkey. Surely, a fine steed would be more appropriate! (*Rashi*).

Alternatively, סוּסָא means a horse that runs as fast as lightning (אֶתְאֵלֶּיךָ is from בְּרָק, lightning). According to this translation, Shapur meant: Perhaps the Messiah has not yet come because he has to ride a slow donkey. If he would ride my fastest horse, he might arrive sooner! (*Yad Ramah*; see *Maharsha* for another explanation).

52. [That is to say: Your finest horse is not as splendid as the Messiah's donkey.] Shmuel did not mean this seriously; he said it only to brush off Shapur's mockery by responding in kind (*Rashi*; cf. *Maharal*; see also *Maharsha*).

53. R' Shimon ben Yochai and his son hid in a cave for twelve years to avoid arrest by the Romans. During that time they were sustained in a miraculous fashion and their sole occupation was studying Torah (see *Shabbos* 33b).

54. In fact, all Jews have a share in the World to Come, as stated in the Mishnah on 90a. R' Yehoshua ben Levi was asking whether he would enter the World to Come directly, without prior judgment and suffering (see *Tosafos* to *Kesubos* 103b מוֹמֵן בְּרִיָּה).

55. The *Shechinah* [the Divine Presence] was with them (*Rashi*).

56. He saw only Elijah and himself, but he also heard the voice of the

*Shechinah* [lamenting the length of the exile (see *Maharsha*)] (see *Rashi*; cf. *Yad Ramah*, *Maharsha*).

57. *Gra* emends the text to read: אֶפְתָּחָא דְרוֹמִי, the gate of Rome (cf. *Maharsha*, who translates the southern gate). This was the text of *Yad Ramah*, *Abarbanel*, *Maharsha* et al. (see *Dikdukei Sofrim*).

Elijah did not literally mean that the Messiah was at the gate of the city. Rather, he meant that the Messiah was in the part of Gan Eden that faces the city (*Rashi*, in the name of his teacher; cf. *Maharsha*).

The Midrash states that the Messiah was born when the Temple was destroyed and was subsequently taken to Gan Eden (*Maharsha*).

This should not be understood to mean that the Messiah is not a natural-born human being. Rather, in every generation since the destruction of the Temple there has lived a person of outstanding piety, ready to be invested with the spirit of the Messiah when the time for the redemption comes. As was the case with Moses, this person will not know that he is destined to be the Messiah, until the time is ready (*Chasam Sofer* Responsa vol. 6 §98; R' Chaim Vital, cited by *Margaliyos HaYam*).

58. How will it be possible to identify him?

59. They were afflicted with *tzaraas* – a disease whose symptoms include discolored patches on the skin (see *Leviticus* ch. 13). The Messiah himself is likewise afflicted, as stated in *Isaiah* (53:4): אֲכַן חֲלָנִי: Indeed, it was our diseases that he bore and our pains that he endured, whereas we considered him plagued (i.e. suffering *tzaraas* [see 98b note 39]), smitten by God, and afflicted. This verse teaches that the diseases that the people ought to have suffered because of their sins are borne instead by the Messiah (see *Rashi*, *Yad Ramah*; see also *Anaf Yosef*, *Maharal*).

It is difficult to explain the presence in Gan Eden of the other sickly paupers (*Maharsha*; see *Yeshuos Meshicho Iyun* 1, beginning of ch. 2). In light of this difficulty, *Abarbanel* shows that this story is a parable.

60. That is, all those who have several sores (*Rashi*).

61. [Literally: he unties one and ties one.] Each of the others unties all his bandages at the same time, cleans all his sores, and then reties all the bandages. The Messiah, however, unties only one bandage at a time; he cleans that sore and reties the bandage before proceeding to the next one. He does not allow two sores to be exposed at the same time (*Rashi*).

62. He does not want to delay even the amount of time it takes to tie two bandages (*Rashi*).

When the moment of redemption comes it must be grasped at once, before Israel's Heavenly accusers have an opportunity to issue new denunciations and postpone the redemption. The redemption from Egypt was “in haste” (*Exodus* 12:11) for the same reason (*Toras Chaim*).



ben Levi] answered [Elijah]: “He said, ‘Peace be upon you, son of Levi.’” – אמר ליה [Elijah] said to [R’ Yehoshua ben Levi]: “He has assured you and your father that you are both destined to enter the World to Come.”<sup>[63]</sup> – אמר ליה [R’ Yehoshua ben Levi] then said to [Elijah]: “He lied to me, שקורי קא שקר בי – for he said to me, ‘I am coming today,’ ולא אָתָא – and he has not come!” – אמר ליה [Elijah] said to [R’ Yehoshua ben Levi]: “This is what he was saying to you: ‘היום אם בקולו תשמעו’ – Today, if you heed His voice!”<sup>[64] [65]</sup>

The Gemara relates another exchange concerning the time of Messiah’s arrival:

R’ Yose ben Kisma was asked by his students: “When will the son of David come?” – אימתי בן דוד בא – אמר – He answered: “I am afraid lest you ask me for a sign.”<sup>[66]</sup> – תבקשו ממני אות – אמרו לו – They said to him: “We will

not ask you for a sign.” – אמר להם – He said to them: “When this gate<sup>[67]</sup> falls and is rebuilt, ויפול – and then falls a second time and is rebuilt ויפול – and then falls a third time, ואין מספיקין לבנותו עד שבן דוד בא – they will not have a chance to rebuild it before the son of David comes.” – אמרו לו – They said to him: “Our teacher! Give us a sign!” – אמר להם – He said to them: “But did you not tell me that you would not ask me for a sign?” – אמרו לו – They said to him: “Even so.” – ואף על פי כן – אמר להם – He said to them: “If so,<sup>[68]</sup> may the waters of the cave of Pame’as<sup>[69]</sup> turn into blood!” – ונהפכו לדם – And indeed they turned into blood.

R’ Yose ben Kisma gives another prediction concerning the advent of the Messianic era:

At the time of his death he said to [those present]: “Put my coffin deep in the ground,” – העמיקו לי ארוני – אמר להם

## NOTES

63. Unless you are both completely righteous he would not have greeted you and mentioned your father’s name (*Rashi*).

64. *Psalms* 95:7. The redemption will come before its fixed time, if the people “heed God’s voice” – i.e. they repent and perform virtuous deeds (*Maharsha*).

*Maharsha* raises the following difficulty: The Gemara in *Eruvin* 43b states that Elijah will appear to the people the day before the Messiah arrives. In this narrative, it is clear Elijah had not yet come. Therefore, how could the Messiah suggest that it was possible for him to arrive that very day?

In view of this difficulty, *Maharsha* concludes that when the Messiah said “today” he did not mean it literally [rather, he meant the earliest possible opportunity].

However, if this is so, why did the Messiah prepare himself to come to redeem the Jews at just a moment’s notice?

Some commentators resolve both of these difficulties by asserting that Elijah will precede the Messiah only if the redemption occurs in its preordained time. In the event of an early redemption, they will arrive together. The reference here is to an early redemption, as is evident from the Messiah’s remark that he will come “today” (*Otzar Balum* on *Ein Yaakov*; see *Chasam Sofer* Responsa vol. 6 §98; see also note 48).

65. *Maharal* explains this episode as an allegory in line with his general approach that the Sages expressed profound spiritual concepts in simple terms. The following are some of his points in brief:

*R’ Yehoshua ben Levi met Elijah*: The appearance of Elijah is not necessarily a visual matter. It may involve the reception in one’s mind of a thought implanted there by Elijah.

*Ask the Messiah himself*: Asking the Messiah means dwelling upon the concept of the Messiah.

*He sits at the gate of Rome*: When Rome falls, the Messianic Kingdom will rise.

*He sits among sickly paupers*: The natural world is hostile to him because his role is to bring the supernatural redemption.

[See also *Abarbanel* (*Yeshuos Meshicho*, *Iyun* 1 ch. 2) who shows that this narrative is allegorical (see note 59), and presents two interpretations of it.]

66. I.e. a supernatural sign that will attest to the truth of my prediction (*Maharsha*).

67. I.e. the gate of Rome (see notes 19 and 65). R’ Yose ben Kisma was visiting Rome at that time (*Rashi* in *Ein Yaakov*; cf. *Maharsha*, *Maharal*, *Ben Yehoyada*).

68. That is to say: Since you insist on a sign, I will give you one.

[See *Ben Yehoyada*, who explains the students’ behavior and why R’ Yose ben Kisma eventually acquiesced and gave them a sign.]

69. The source of the Jordan (*Rashi*, from *Bechoros* 55a). פְּמִיִּס, Pame’as, is the modern Banias, a town in Upper Galilee on the southern slope of Mt. Hermon. In ancient times it was rebuilt by Herod’s son Phillipus, who named the town Caesarea.]