

The Messiah Is Not Coming

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One of the most anticipated movies of the year is *Avengers: Doomsday*, which will be released on December 18, 2026, the next installment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The movie is a reunion of sorts, as it brings back directors Joe and Anthony Russo, who directed some of the best movies in the series, including the previous two Avengers movies, *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. The movie will also bring together the Avengers, the Fantastic Four, and the X-Men, heroes who have never before appeared together because of previous licensing agreements. Previews for the movie have teased the return of actor Chris Evans in the role of Steve Rogers, the first Captain America, who seemingly grew old and retired at the end of *Endgame*, as well as Robert Downey Jr., whose character Iron Man, Tony Stark, the centerpiece of the MCU for a decade, sacrificed his life to save the universe. This time, however, Downey Jr. will portray Doctor Doom, one of the most well-known and formidable villains from Marvel Comics.

Avengers: Doomsday will also bring back a massive roster of characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In preparation for its release, I have watched several of the movies that I had not seen in theaters, as well as rewatched both *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. After watching *Infinity War* again, I noticed something that I had not picked up in previous viewings. *Avengers: Infinity War* is a very Jewish movie. Let me explain.

The plot of the movie centers around Thanos, whose home planet Titan fell into ruin after ignoring his warnings of overpopulation. This event formed his radical philosophy that the universe was doomed to collapse unless half of all life is erased. Thanos had cameo appearances in several Marvel movies prior to *Infinity War*, showing his quest to procure the six Infinity Stones and unite them in the Infinity Gauntlet, a glove of infinite power that would help him achieve his goal. The movie *Infinity War* saw the Avengers, the Guardians of the Galaxy, and several other Marvel heroes team up in an attempt to stop Thanos. Subverting expectations, all of these heroes failed, and with the snap of his fingers while wearing the Infinity Gauntlet <snap>, Thanos wiped out half of all living beings from existence.

Numerous fan-favorite heroes disintegrated before our very eyes, including Black Panther, Doctor Strange, Winter Soldier, Scarlet Witch, Star-Lord, and Groot. Most painful to watch was Tony Stark holding Spider-Man, Peter Parker, as Parker fades into nothingness,

saying “I don’t want to go.” The movie ends with the Avengers defeated and lost, and Thanos content, watching the sunrise.

The post-credits scene shows us the real-world consequences of Thanos’ snap. On a busy city street, cars crash, helicopters fly into buildings, and mass panic ensues as half of humanity vanishes. Nick Fury, played by Samuel L. Jackson, rummages through his bag for a beeper that looks simultaneously futuristically alien and a relic from the past. As he himself disintegrates, Fury utters the not-safe-for-synagogue phrase that Jackson is known for saying in many of his movies (If you know, you know). The last image we see before the screen cuts to the credits is the beeper lighting up with the colors and symbol for Captain Marvel, a hero with near-infinite cosmic powers whom Fury met in the 1990s, and who has spent the previous thirty years traveling across the galaxy.

This is not a happy ending. It is not a satisfying ending. But it is a very Jewish ending. Dara Horn, in her now-classic book *People Love Dead Jews*, devotes an entire chapter to the unique features of Jewish literature. She begins (p. 74) by highlighting the work of American literary critic Frank Kermode, who argued that we seek stories with coherent and satisfying endings because we want to inhabit a world that makes sense. Writers create narratives with origins and ends, making every detail add up to something meaningful, thereby crafting a comprehensible world. This is how Western literature works, because it is based on the West’s understanding of the Bible. Kermode writes in his book *The Sense of an Ending* (p. 6-7), “The Bible is a familiar model of history. It begins at the beginning (‘In the beginning...’) and ends with a vision of the end (‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus’).”

Right now, you are probably thinking the same thing as Dara Horn when she read this. “Hold on a second! That’s not how my Bible ends!” Horn points out that Kermode’s analysis of beginning-middle-end story structure is not universal. Rather, it is Christian. When we watch, read, or hear a story, we want the good guys to win, or at least the main character to have an epiphany or learn something. However, Dara Horn demonstrates that we learn this expectation from the Christian understanding of the arc of history. In contradistinction, the major works of Jewish literature almost never give their readers any of these things.

Stories with definitive endings do not necessarily reflect a belief that the world makes sense, but they do reflect a belief in the power of art to make sense of it. What one finds in Jewish storytelling, however, is something very different: a kind of realism that comes from humility, and from the knowledge that one cannot be true to the human experience while pretending to make sense of the world. These are stories without conclusions, but full of

endurance and resilience, that give a glimmer of hope, or that will carry us through to find meaning.

Among countless examples of this phenomenon are Sholom Aleichem's stories about Tevye the Dairyman, which served as the source material for the *Fiddler on the Roof*, the musical we spoke about on Rosh Hashanah. The musical ends on a downer, with the Jews expelled from Anatevka by the Russian authorities. And yet, the Jews still see a future of possibility ahead, looking forward to new lives in their respective destinations of America or Eretz Yisrael. The show, however, omits many tragic details from the source material. In the original stories, Tevye's wife Golde drops dead, Tevye's son-in-law, Motl the tailor, also dies suddenly, and Tevye's daughter Shprintze drowns herself. At the end of these stories, Tevye tells the reader, "Tell our Jews everywhere that they shouldn't worry: our old God still lives!" This is certainly not a happy ending, but it is a very Jewish one. We persevere. We endure. We hope. We look to the future, especially during the worst of times.

The stories of Tevye the Dairyman, like other works of Jewish literature, derive these themes from classical Jewish texts and the Jewish experience. The Torah has no definitive ending, with the Israelites encamped across the Jordan River, not yet crossing into the Promised Land. We don't know what's going to happen next, nor what kind of leader Joshua will be after the death of Moses.

Like the Torah, the historical narratives of the Bible repeatedly end without a resolution. The Book of Kings, which narrates the history of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, ends with the Temple destroyed, Jerusalem burned to the ground, and the royal line of David taken off to exile in Babylon, events which took place in 586 BCE. Reading this part of the Bible, it seems as if God has abandoned the Davidic dynasty and the Judean people. But just a few verses later, we read that after 37 years in exile, one of the last remaining descendants of the Davidic dynasty was released from prison and was generously provided for, by the Babylonian king.

The Book of Chronicles, the final book in the Jewish ordering of the Bible, closes with Cyrus, the King of Persia, permitting the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. None of these endings is really an ending. They imply that exile and destruction are not final, that ours is an incomplete story that is always "to be continued."

This outlook informed the early generations of the rabbinic era after the destruction of the Second Temple. In at least four places in Rabbinic Literature, we find the story of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai's escape from Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. During the Jewish Revolt against Rome, Roman forces were besieging the city and rival Jewish factions within the city were debating how to respond. A group of militant zealots burned all of the grain that was stored in

Jerusalem and barred the gates, eliminating the possibility of surrender, forcing the Jews to fight. According to the well-known story told by the Rabbis, Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, seeing the fanaticism of these Jews and the futility of trying to fight the Romans, was smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin, brought to the Roman general and later Emperor Vespasian, and convinced him to allow the Jews to establish an academy of learning. Again, in the wake of destruction, hope exists, and a better future can unfold.

Even in modern times, in the wake of the worst destruction our people have ever faced, hope prevailed. A few days after American forces entered Dachau, U.S. Army chaplains held a prayer service, where the survivors gathered in the courtyard. Barely able to stand, they sang הַתִּקְוָה, “The Hope,” with the words עוֹד לֹא אָבְדָה תִּקְוָתֵנוּ “our hope is not yet lost.” Despite all of the horrors that they suffered, hope not only survived, it became one of the primary sentiments that motivated the Jewish People to rise from the ashes of the Shoah. They did not wait to see what the future would bring. They created it for themselves.

It is well known that one of the primary projects of the Jewish People after the Shoah was the founding of the State of Israel. Lesser known, but of equal, if not greater, importance was the extraordinary baby boom in the Displaced Persons camps in Allied-Occupied Europe, one of the greatest concentrations of pregnancy and birth in human history. Jewish survivors married and created families at remarkable rates. Hundreds of babies were born each month, peaking at around 750. By the end of 1946, approximately 8,000 Jewish babies had been born, and nearly one-third of Jewish women between 18 and 45 had either given birth or were pregnant. In 1947, it was estimated that there were 50.2 births per 1,000 people, an extremely high figure by global standards. These children, one of whom is my own father-in-law, embodied the survivors’ refusal to allow destruction to have the final word.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has written about the difference between hope and optimism. He wrote, “Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue; hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope. Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never – despite a history of sometimes awesome suffering – given up hope.”

Hope has many features. It refers to the future, but it is grounded in the present. Hope is an active emotion. The hopeful person is not someone who waits for the future to change, but brings about the future through present action. Hope is also based in freedom, relying on our ability to liberate ourselves from limitation and shape our own future. It is an expression of being a free agent, capable of moving beyond current circumstances, rather than allowing the

past to dictate the future. Hope is grounded in uncertainty, which gives us the freedom to imagine, and help create, a future that does not yet exist.

The Jewish sense of hope has been best encapsulated by the idea of the messiah, which has its origins in many of the biblical prophets, who dream of a day when Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the People of Israel will return from exile. Drawing upon many of these biblical references, later Jewish thought formalized the definition of the Messiah into a person, descended from King David, who will restore Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, gather the dispersed of the Jewish people, rebuild Jerusalem, and usher in an age of peace, justice, and universal acknowledgment of God.

While these ideas are indeed hopeful and full of promise, the investment of Messianic hopes in one person usually had disastrous results. During the first revolt against Rome, several charismatic Jewish leaders were viewed as the Messiah. And yet, Roman victory resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, enormous loss of life, and the enslavement and displacement of countless Jews. Less than a century later, Shimon Bar Kokhba was hailed as the Messiah who would really defeat Rome this time. No less than the great Rabbi Akiva thought Bar Kokhba was legit. However, the Romans not only put down this revolt, they devastated Judea, barred Jews from Jerusalem, suppressed Jewish national and religious life, and renamed the province of Judea to *Syria-Palestina*, as an attempt to sever the connection between the Jewish People and the land of Israel.

In the 17th century, there was Shabbetai Tz'vi, a Jewish mystic who declared himself the Messiah, and gained a mass following of Jews in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe. When the Sultan of Istanbul offered him the choice between execution or conversion to Islam, he chose the latter, shattering the hopes of his followers and leaving a lasting legacy of disillusionment and suspicion toward messianic movements.

But since the rabbinic period, Jewish thought has also had an opposing sensibility, one that cautioned against messianic fervor. According to one midrash (ARNB 31), if you have a sapling in your hand and you are told that the Messiah has arrived, you should first plant the sapling and then go out to greet the Messiah. Similarly, a humorous anecdote from Eastern Europe relates that in a small shtetl, the community paid one of its members a ruble a week to sit at the edge of town and be the first to greet the Messiah when he arrived. A stranger once approached the town and asked what he was doing. When he explained what his job was and how much he was getting paid, the stranger asked, "Why would you take such a job?" The man answered, "You're right, the pay isn't great, but at least I have good job security."

A well-known midrash (Sanhedrin 98a) teaches that an ancient sage asked Elijah the Prophet when the Messiah will come. Elijah tells him that he can ask the Messiah himself. After receiving directions from Elijah, the sage finds the Messiah where Elijah said he would be: at the gates of a great city, with all of the other outcast lepers, tying and untying his bandages one at a time. When the sage asks the Messiah, “When will you come?” The Messiah answers, “Today.” When the day passes without redemption, the sage is exasperated. The Messiah lied to him! Elijah explains to the sage that the Messiah meant a verse from the Psalms (95:7), “Today, if you will listen to his voice.” For the Rabbis, this meant that redemption does not depend only upon the Messiah’s arrival, but also upon whether we will listen and respond.

In modern times, inspired by the messianic impulse, and coupled with the skepticism that there is an individual Messiah who will bring change to the world, both the Reform Movement and the Ḥasidic movement took this idea and reinterpreted it in their own unique ways. Ḥasidism, drawing upon earlier Kabbalah, internalized the messianic mission in the life of every Jew, teaching that through doing mitzvot, we elevate the divine sparks embedded throughout the material world. The Reform Movement rejected the idea of a personal Messiah as superstitious, and charged modern Jews to engage with broader society, in order to bring about a more just, compassionate, and peaceful world.

We enact this idea each year at the Passover Seder. The customary practice is to fill a cup of wine for Elijah, who, according to Jewish tradition, might arrive on Passover and announce the coming of the Messiah. We fill the cup and leave it waiting for him, just as generations of Jews have waited for redemption.

However, there is another custom for this moment of the Seder. Many families, including my own, begin with an empty cup for Elijah, and each person at the Seder pours a little wine into it from their own glass. Everyone contributes a portion, and the cup becomes full only through our combined effort. In this version of the ritual, we are not merely waiting for Elijah to arrive and announce that redemption has come. We are acknowledging that each of us must contribute something toward bringing it about. The messianic age will arrive only when enough of us are willing to pour some of ourselves into creating it.

The Jewish People introduced one of history’s most transformative ideas: that society need not remain as it is, and that we can improve it. Despite any current challenge we might face, life today is demonstrably better than it was in decades or centuries past. Is this a result of God’s intervention, or is it a result of human endeavor? Or perhaps it is that human endeavor is the way that God works to bring about a better world.

A verse in Deuteronomy (32:4) says God is אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱמוּנָה, “a faithful God.” A midrash (Sifre D’varim 307:1) understands this to mean that God has faith in us, even in the face of all of our failures and mistakes. God’s faith in us, and the improvements that we have already achieved, should motivate us to keep working for that ever-possible Messianic age.

Nearly 900 years ago, the Jewish thinker and philosopher Maimonides composed his Thirteen Principles of Faith, which we discussed last night. As I explained, when rendered as liturgy, each begins “I believe with complete faith...” One in particular addresses the Messianic era. It says,

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמּוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה בְּבִיאַת הַמָּשִׁיחַ, וְאֵף עַל פִּי שְׂתִיתְמַהֲמָהּ, עִם כָּל זֶה אֶחְכֶּה לוֹ בְּכָל יוֹם שְׁפִיבּוֹא.
“I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though it may tarry, nevertheless I wait for it every day.” Last night, I voiced Jewish tradition’s objections to the very idea of a list of Jewish beliefs. Today, I take issue with the word choice of the GOAT of Jewish thought. The word he used for “wait,” אֶחְכֶּה, carries a sense of patience and expectation. I would much prefer a different word that also means “wait,” that carries a more active connotation: מְקַוֶּה, from the same root as תְּקַוֶּה, which we know also means “hope.” The concluding verse in Psalm 27, the Psalm for this season of repentance, has a form of this word, and demands of us: קְוֵה אֱלֹהִים חֲזַק וַיַּאֲמֹץ לִבְךָ וְקֵוֶה אֱלֹהִים, “Place your hope in the Eternal One; be strong and God will make your heart courageous. Place your hope in the Eternal One.”

By placing our hope in God, we strengthen ourselves to do the work of bringing about the messianic age. Each of us has a role to play, and skills that we can devote to this most sacred task. Yom Kippur is the day when we remind ourselves, not just that we make mistakes, but that we possess the capabilities of greatness. Today is the opportunity to remember that our superpower is self-awareness, when we are charged to remember how great we can be, if we would only strive to be our best selves.

We make the effort. We struggle. Sometimes we fail. Most of the time, God willing, we succeed. But, regardless, we persevere. As much as we might worry about the future, we cannot predict it. The story’s end remains to be written. We live in a world that is constantly “to be continued...” And only we can write the next installment, because that singular, personal Messiah is not coming. The power to bring about the promises of the messianic age is already here, in each one of us.

The Avengers are not going to save humanity. With hope in God, we must do it ourselves. So, ready your web-slingers, put on your high-tech body armor, pick up and swing your hammer, strap on your vibranium shield. Messiahs: Assemble!