

Can the World Be Redeemed? *Ge'ulah* versus *Pidyon*: Toward a Mundane, Non-Eschatological Approach to Redemption

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Abstract

In this essay, I juxtapose two conceptions of redemption, as expressed by the Hebrew terms *ge'ulah* and *pidyon*. I contend that today, the non-eschatological conception of redemption that animates the term *pidyon* is more politically salient than traditional cautions against *ge'ulah*-inspired apocalypticism. Indeed, restoring the more mundane understanding of redemption suggested by *pidyon* – as release from inherited narratives and obligations – may help us break the stalemate that has descended upon Israeli politics.

Keywords

redemption – Israel – Benjamin Netanyahu – Franz Rosenzweig – Jewish politics – apocalypticism

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For the Lord will ransom (*padah*) Jacob, redeem him (*uge'alo*) from one too strong for him.¹

¹ Jeremiah 31:11, JPS translation.

You redeemed us (*ge'altanu*) from Egypt, Lord our God, and freed us (*peditanu*) from the house of bondage.

Traditional liturgy²



As a child growing up in 1980s America, I mourned the fact that I had been born in a post-ideological age. My generation was fortunate or unfortunate, depending on one's perspective, to find itself located on the victorious side at the end of history, bereft of grand passions and revolutionary causes. In short, I felt cheated. If anything, the sense of having missed the party (*tartei mashma*) only grew when, later in life, I moved to Israel. Arriving in the post-Oslo era, I found a consensus converging around the maintenance of the "status quo" – with a correspondingly static public debate. Thus, my first thought upon the 2016 election of Donald Trump was, "Be careful what you wish for." Trump's election marked the culmination of a series of events (e.g., Brexit) that appeared to signal history's abrupt and confounding resumption. If one lives long enough, it turns out, one may witness the unsettling of foundational liberal assumptions, the return of contentious politics, and the rekindling of redemptive anticipation.

When the decisive moment arrived, however, I found myself increasingly skeptical regarding both the allure and the relevance of redemptive politics (as traditionally understood). These reservations derived less from the well-worn cautions about the dangers of pursuing ultimate ends through political means, than from the dawning sense that the assumptions upon which these cautions were predicated had become largely anachronistic. In the twentieth century, redemptive politics were conceived as grand, revolutionary, even messianic. When the investigation is framed in these terms, the analysis quickly turns from the monitory (e.g., redemptive politics are dangerous) to the metaphysical (e.g., is the world redeemable?). In the twenty-first century, however, received rubrics for evaluating the meaning, merits, and/or dangers of redemption fail to illuminate our political predicaments, especially when it comes to Jewish politics. The commonplace according to which eschatology is the characteristic temptation (and deformation) of Jewish politics no longer captures the dominant historical imaginary shaping our political reality – namely, the imaginary that has entrenched an unjust status quo in Israel/Palestine.

² Translation from Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2009), 446–447.

To fathom these historical and ideological dislocations, I submit, it is imperative to rethink the meaning and implications of redemption for Jewish politics.

Thus, my goal in this essay is less to pronounce for or against redemption than to dislodge the dominant, eschatological framework for evaluating redemption's political valence. Received understandings of redemption, I caution, may prevent us from grasping the most powerful ideological currents shaping Jewish politics today – and they risk prematurely closing off possibilities for oppositional coalition building.³ In an effort to take the conversation down a notch, from the lofty realm of metaphysical speculation to the worldly realm of economic exchange, I juxtapose two conceptions of redemption, as expressed by the Hebrew terms *ge'ulah* and *pidyon*. Today, I contend, the non-eschatological conception of redemption that animates the term *pidyon* is more politically salient than traditional cautions against *ge'ulah*-inspired apocalypticism. Indeed, restoring the more mundane understanding of redemption suggested by *pidyon* – as release from inherited narratives and obligations – may help us break the stalemate that has descended upon Israeli politics. In short, I will use the Rosenzweig-inspired gesture of translation from Hebrew to contest the eschatological framing of Jewish politics that we have inherited from Franz Rosenzweig.⁴

Hebrew proves useful, for my purposes, because it ascribes mundane connotations to the term “redemption” – connotations that are harder to hear in English, which uses this word for both eschatological and mundane iterations.⁵ In Hebrew, by contrast, there are (at least) two words that are commonly translated as “redemption”: *ge'ulah* (redemption, deliverance, liberation) and *pidyon* (ransom, redemption, delivery sale [in cash], turnover, proceeds).⁶ In biblical

3 In this essay, I focus on one political issue – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and its implications for Jewish politics in Israel and the United States. Although I focus narrowly, I do not mean to imply that this issue – or these communities – exhaust contemporary Jewish politics.

4 I am using translation solely for heuristic purposes. I do not mean to endorse Rosenzweig's contention that the Hebrew language encodes Judaism's timeless political verities. See Franz Rosenzweig, “Classical and Modern Hebrew,” in *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), 265. See also Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William H. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 301–302. For Rosenzweig's metaphysics of the Hebrew language, see Dana Hollander, “Franz Rosenzweig on Nation, Translation, and Judaism,” *Philosophy Today* 38 (1994): 380–389; Leora Batnitzky, “Franz Rosenzweig on Translation and Exile,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 131–143.

5 In contemporary English parlance, one can “redeem” vouchers, coupons, and glass bottles for a cash payment. Public discourse often centers on whether youthful transgressions and historical injustices can be “redeemed.”

6 Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (Tel Aviv: Chemed Books Yedioth Ahronoth, 1996), s.v. פִּדְיוֹן and גְּאוּלָּה.

and liturgical Hebrew, the etymologically related verbs *padah* and *ga'al* may be used as synonyms (see Jer 31:11). And, as I explain below, *pidyon* and *ge'ulah* converge around a set of meanings derived from biblical contexts of legal and economic exchange. In key ways, however, the concepts of *ge'ulah* and *pidyon* diverge, and their points of divergence track two distinct conceptions of the relationship between history and politics.

We tend to overlook this divergence, for with the ascendance of a political-theological idiom for the analysis of Jewish politics, redemption in the sense of *pidyon* has largely dropped out of the lexicon. The default understanding of redemption among scholars of modern Jewish thought closely tracks the Hebrew term *ge'ulah*. On this view, redemption is “an encompassing divine resolution that includes as many aspects of the divine justification of human obedience as can be imagined. It is *the* eschatological concept.”⁷ This definition reflects the standpoint of *ge'ulah*, whose primary meaning, in some contemporary Hebrew dictionaries, is “salvation, emancipation, rescue, deliverance.”⁸ Yet *ge'ulah* is not devoid of worldly connotations. In the Hebrew Bible, *ge'ulah* indicates “the obligation and even the right that a relative has to remove an object (house, field, slave, soul) from a foreign jurisdiction (owner, oppressor, enemy, death, the underworld) and return it to its former state.”⁹ According to Ben Yehuda, these forms of legal and economic exchange constitute the term’s primary meaning.¹⁰ Indeed, liberation from oppression and emancipation from slavery only appear as the term’s fourth meaning in Ben Yehuda’s dictionary – nor does he stress liberation’s eschatological connotations. While the Kanaani dictionary also prioritizes the redemption of objects that have been sold and individuals who have been enslaved, it glosses the messianic era and the return to Zion as the word’s sixth meaning.¹¹ Similarly, the entry from the *Sapir Dictionary* registers the messianic age, the salvation of sinners that comes through belief in Jesus Christ (in Christianity), and the physical and spiritual liberation effected through return to Zion (in Judaism) among the term’s meanings.¹²

7 Arthur A. Cohen, “Redemption,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 762.

8 See Eitan Avniyon, *Sapir Dictionary* (Or Yehuda: Hed Artzi, 1999) [Hebrew]. See also the preface to the second printing of Yosef Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1956) [Hebrew].

9 M. A. Anat, “The Deterministic Principle in the Exodus Story and in the Prophecy of Future Redemption,” *Beit Mikra*, no. 4 (1978): 426 [Hebrew].

10 See Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Ben Yehuda, 1948–1959), 665 [Hebrew].

11 Yaakov Kanaani, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Massada, 1960), 391 [Hebrew].

12 Avniyon, *Sapir Dictionary*, s.v. גאולה.

What are the dispositions toward history characteristic of redemption conceived as *ge'ulah*? The term's mundane usages exhibit what Gershom Scholem calls a "restorative" orientation toward the future. When one fulfills the obligation to "redeem" a slave from captivity, the aim is to restore a prior state of freedom. At first glance, this usage bears scant resemblance to the eschatological imagination that *ge'ulah* encodes when it signifies the messianic advent. On Scholem's reading, however, the restorative and apocalyptic strands of messianism "are deeply intertwined and yet at the same time of a contradictory nature; the Messianic idea crystallizes only out of the two of them together."¹³ In an article cataloging the Bible's redemptive lexicon, Anat contends that deterministic principles animate *ge'ulah* in both its restorative and eschatological acceptations. Just as redemption from Egyptian bondage was in no way contingent upon the Israelites' desire to be redeemed, Anat argues, so will the future *ge'ulah* be determined by God, independent of human volition.¹⁴ Without endorsing the details of these arguments – which lie beyond the ambit of my scholarly competence – I would nevertheless highlight the ways in which they frame the question of redemption's political valence. Scholem famously (if ambivalently) warns against the seductions of messianic politics, which ostensibly breed passivity and/or apocalyptic frenzy. Stressing the deterministic imagination that animates biblical and rabbinic concepts of *ge'ulah*, Anat also foregrounds the passivity-inducing tendencies of redemptive narratives.

It goes without saying that Rosenzweig thinks of redemption in terms of *ge'ulah*. Indeed, *The Star of Redemption* provides a canonical illustration of *ge'ulah*'s future-oriented temporality. On Rosenzweig's narrative, the doctrine of redemption entails an expectant stance, the anticipation of history's consummation. As Rosenzweig says of the Jewish people, "It lives in its own redemption. It has anticipated eternity. The future is the driving power in the circuit of its year."¹⁵ In the Jewish case, at least, this anticipation withdraws quotidian existence from the unfolding of historical dynamics: "This people is denied a life in time for the sake of life in eternity."¹⁶ Indeed, Rosenzweig char-

13 Gershom Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," in Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 3.

14 See Anat, "Deterministic Principle," 429.

15 Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 328. For a more nuanced account of the *Star*'s temporality, see Leora Batnitzky, "The Philosophical Import of Carnal Israel: Hermeneutics and the Structure of Rosenzweig's *Star*," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 9 (1999): 127–153; Benjamin Pollock, "To Infinity and Beyond: Cohen and Rosenzweig on Comportment toward Redemption," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism Revisited*, ed. M. Morgan and S. Weitzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

16 Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 304.

acterizes Judaism's redemptive stance as blatantly ahistorical and expressly anti-political: "This people must deny itself active and full participation in the life of the world with its daily, apparently conclusive, solving of all contradictions. It is not permitted to recognize this daily solving of contradictions, for that would render it disloyal to the hope of a final solution."¹⁷ As Peter Gordon has argued, the flip side of Rosenzweig's idealized, essentializing portrait of Judaism is a wholly "disenchanted vision of politics" as "a spectacle of mere violence and ruin."¹⁸ When redemption is glossed as *ge'ulah*, Jews are confronted with a binary decision: either remain faithful to the claims of eternity by adopting "an attitude of political indifference," or accede to the violence that characterizes mundane temporality.¹⁹ Glossing redemption as *ge'ulah*, Rosenzweig precludes the possibility of a mundane release effected by standard legal, political, or economic instruments.²⁰ In the discourse that Rosenzweig initiates, talk of *ge'ulah* circles around a set of persistent theologico-political concerns: Do redemptive expectations inspire activism or quietism? Are these political (or antipolitical) tendencies invariably dangerous?

Pidyon, I want to suggest, usefully resists this eschatological framing. The term *pidyon* closely tracks what Ben Yehuda identifies as *ge'ulah's* primary meaning, albeit with a more pronounced emphasis on monetary exchange. In Ben Yehuda's dictionary, *pidyon's* first meaning is "ransom, the money given to redeem a person or thing from enslavement" (with reference to Exod 21:30).²¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its economic origins, the term *pidyon* has acquired various bureaucratic uses in contemporary Hebrew. In addition to the redemption of captives and assorted biblical tithes, contemporary dictionaries list redemption of unused vacation and sick days as standard usages

¹⁷ Ibid, 332.

¹⁸ Peter Eli Gordon, "The Concept of the Apolitical: German Jewish Thought and Weimar Political Theology," *Social Research* 74 (2007): 861, 863.

¹⁹ Ibid., 866.

²⁰ Admittedly, my reading of Rosenzweig's attitude toward politics verges on caricature (although the caricatured view does not lack textual support). For a more nuanced – and historically contextualized – interpretation that absolves Rosenzweig of the charge of "anti-politics," see Benjamin Pollock, "From Nation State to World Empire: Franz Rosenzweig's Redemptive Imperialism," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11 (2004): 332–353. According to Pollock, Rosenzweig does reserve a role for politics in the achievement of redemption, for he predicates redemption on the creation of a global world empire. Yet the vision of redemption that animates this more robustly political account nevertheless remains that of *ge'ulah* – the consummation of universal history. That is, the political redemption that Rosenzweig heralds remains both teleological and theological and, as such, stands in contrast to the mundane, political conception of redemption that I associate with *pidyon*.

²¹ Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, 4828.

of *pidyon*.²² Unlike *ge'ulah*, however, *pidyon* lacks the eschatological connotations of messianic salvation. As Ben Yehuda notes, the verb from which *pidyon* is derived – *PDH*, whose second meaning is “to liberate” – is used to describe the Israelites’ emancipation from slavery in Egypt (see Deut 7:8; 9:26). Ben Yehuda records as additional meanings “to save” and “to be liberated” – but, again, the liberation in question involves concrete instances of historical oppression (see Isa 1:27).²³ To the best of my knowledge, the words *pidyon* and *PDH* are almost never used in conjunction with the messianic era or the world to come.²⁴ Unlike *ge'ulah*, which readily acquires metahistorical connotations, *pidyon* remains firmly tethered to history, to contexts of negotiation and monetary exchange.

The characteristic temporality of redemption understood as *pidyon* is best illustrated by the *pidyon ha-ben* (redemption of the firstborn) ceremony. Performed on the thirty-first day after the birth of “a firstborn son of an Israelite mother,” the ceremony “redeems” the child from the biblically mandated obligation to assist priests in the temple service.²⁵ The ritual’s genealogy is bound up with the story of the golden calf. After the golden calf incident, God transferred ritual duties from the firstborn son of each family to the entire Levite tribe, whose members resisted the lure of idolatry (see Num 3:41). Yet release from the obligations of divine service requires a formal act (see Num 18:15–16). Thus, in the *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony, parents symbolically exchange money – five silver dollars, in US currency – with a *kohen* in place of their firstborn son, thereby releasing him from priestly service.²⁶

If we take this ritual as a paradigmatic instance of *pidyon*, what does it reveal about the range of meanings that redemption has historically acquired? In *pidyon*, the temporal axis of redemption is past- rather than future-oriented. The ritual locates the son within a lineage dating to ancient times, only to release him from its demands in the present. History is not erased or canceled – the father remains obligated to release his son from sacrificial duty even though the temple no longer stands. In this sense, redemption of the

22 For contemporary bureaucratic uses, see Avniyon, *Sapir Dictionary* and Abraham Even Shoshan, *Even Shoshan Dictionary* (Israel: The New Dictionary, 2006), s.v. פִּדְיוֹן.

23 Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, 4824–4826.

24 Ben Yehuda cites a poem by R. Yitzhak Ibn Giat (1038–1089) that uses *pidyon* to signify the ultimate redemption. It is worth noting that Ben Yehuda translates *pedut* as *Erlösung* and *ge'ulah* as *Einlösung*. See Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, 4828–4829, 4827.

25 Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 431.

26 *Ibid.*, 432.

firstborn is “a means of retaining the idea of our primary obligations to God while at the same time keeping the firstborn son at home with the family.”²⁷ Yet the ritual exchange of coins releases the child into the present, allowing the past to remain past. Here, the redemptive hope is the hope for greater immersion in the present, without denying the historical trajectories that shape our self-understanding.²⁸

When redemption is envisioned as *ge'ulah*, the scholarly conversation centers on whether history has a telos – and whether it is advisable to pursue this end by political means. Yet rituals of *pidyon* confront us with an altogether different question: “Can we be released from involuntary and seemingly absolute obligations”? The latter question is mundane rather than metaphysical and surrounds the modes of exchange that discharge debts. Indeed, when redemption is understood as a practice of *pidyon*, the question this essay grapples with – Can the world be redeemed? – is liable to appear misguided or even nonsensical. *Pidyon* is an ascriptive concept that assigns differential obligations to individuals differently situated. Thus, for those who practice *pidyon*, the issue is not whether an abstraction like “the world” can be redeemed, but whether a given individual can be redeemed. The *halachot* of the *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony, for example, specify who counts as a firstborn son for purposes of the ritual. The obligation to redeem does not apply to a son born via caesarean section, nor does it apply when the mother gives birth after a previous pregnancy that ended in miscarriage (at least forty days after the date of conception).²⁹ In recent years, progressive Jews have debated whether there is a halachic warrant to extend the obligations of redemption to the case of a firstborn daughter.³⁰ Although practices of *pidyon* raise economic and legal – as opposed to metaphysical and eschatological – questions, they are animated by a vision that accords priority to divine obligations. The historical

27 Ibid., 430.

28 The interpretation of *pidyon* that I advance here bears some affinities to Hannah Arendt's notion of forgiveness. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

29 Klein, *Guide*, 431.

30 Martin S. Cohen and Michael Katz, eds., *The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2012), 250–251. As this debate reveals, the word “mundane” is not synonymous with words such as “just” or “egalitarian.” As traditionally understood, the *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony is emphatically patriarchal, contravening values of gender equality. Renouncing an eschatological frame for a mundane conception of redemption, as I advocate, does not guarantee that political projects pursued under this banner will be egalitarian. In other words, the mundane/eschatological axis does not exhaust the slate of considerations that political actors must consider when adopting a redemptive stance.

outlook that suffuses the *pidyon* ritual is theistic, without inviting recondite theological disquisitions.

For too long, the story that we have told about modern Jewish politics has been shaped by what one might call a *ge'ulah* complex: a consuming preoccupation with the supposed liabilities of theological convictions (whether overt or tacit), messianic hopes, and redemptive horizons. The most influential analysts of Jewish politics, both scholarly and popular, have devoted immense energy to ferreting out redemptive expectations and parsing their destructive consequences. Scholem, for example, identifies the messianic idea as “an effective force” – arguably the decisive force – in the determination of Jewish political conduct.³¹ Under conditions of exile, Scholem contends, messianic anticipation inspired an abject, antipolitical stance. “Thus in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled a *life lived in deferment*, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished.”³² The challenge confronting the Zionist movement, on this diagnosis, is to resist the apocalyptic overtones that have been conjured up, confining its operations to the historical plane.³³ Writing in a somewhat different idiom, Michael Walzer – a major force in the establishment of Jewish political thought as an academic discipline – voices similar cautions about theologically inspired “antipolitics,” whether in the form of recklessness or passivity.³⁴ Walzer defines messianism as “any doctrine of a future redemption” that imagines said future as “radically discontinuous with the present” – and he opposes messianism to the “active and participatory politics” that he advocates.³⁵ “Political activists possessed by a messianic faith are cut loose from all the normal constraints on political action. They don’t have to calculate their chances, cultivate popular support, prepare for a long march, build alternative institutions.”³⁶ Like Scholem, Walzer identifies the striving for *ge'ulah* as a signature temptation of Jewish politics. These penetrating analyses – which counsel vigilance against “the eruption of

31 Scholem, “Toward an Understanding,” 2.

32 Ibid., 35.

33 See also the Scholem-Rosenzweig exchange on the Hebrew language. William Cutter, “Ghostly Hebrew, Ghostly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 413–433.

34 Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), xii–xiii; see also 184. Walzer explicitly draws on Scholem's work (ibid., 183). For similar formulations, see Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 37–38, 59, 90–91.

35 Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, 169–170.

36 Ibid., 184.

messianism and the return of traditionalism” – have gained currency because they illuminated central fault lines of twentieth-century Jewish politics.³⁷

When it comes to making sense of the ideological currents shaping Israeli and Jewish politics in the post-Oslo period, however, the preoccupation with *ge'ulah* is unhelpful at best, a misleading diversion at worst. Admittedly, formative strands within Kookian religious Zionism exemplify a *ge'ulah*-oriented vision of redemptive politics. The state is not conceived as a mundane entity but rather – in the words of the traditional prayer for the State of Israel – “the first flowering of our redemption (*ge'ulatenu*).”³⁸ Without scanting the pivotal role that messianic movements have played in entrenching Israeli control over the occupied territories, scuttling the two-state solution, and promoting an annexation agenda, I would nevertheless caution against ascribing paradigmatic significance to these theo-political dynamics. After the Gaza disengagement, the political power of fervently messianic camps has declined, and the most vital segments within religious Zionism are animated by new forms of individualist spirituality and attendant streams of liberalism.³⁹ Given the uncertainties of recent history, I am reluctant to issue categorical pronouncements. Yet I would venture to say that the decisive factor shaping recent Jewish politics has not been redemptive eschatology, but rather Benjamin Netanyahu's emphatically *anti*-messianic ideology of the status quo. By “the ideology of the status quo,” I mean Netanyahu's widely remarked view that, although unsettled, the current state of affairs in Israel/Palestine is preferable to resuming peace talks toward a bilateral, negotiated settlement. Which is not to say that the situation on the ground in Israel/Palestine is, in fact, static. On the contrary, the refusal to resume negotiations has not only allowed for the expansion of Israeli settlements, it has effectively recast the occupation as irreversible, a permanent fixture in the eyes of most Jewish Israelis (and, as the Trump “vision” attests, of many in the international community). We are liable to misunderstand these dynamics if we analyze Jewish politics solely through the lens of *ge'ulah*, without examining the current state of redemption understood as *pidyon*.

The most striking aspect of Netanyahu's historical outlook is not his fierce polemic against pursuit of *ge'ulah*, but his equally staunch opposition to any form of *pidyon*. Political pundits have often noted that Netanyahu favors stasis over change – he is reluctant to adopt risky or transformative policies, averse

37 Walzer, *Paradox of Liberation*, 63.

38 Sacks, *Koren Siddur*, 522–523.

39 For one prominent example, see Rabbi Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, trans. Elie Leshem (London: Toby Press, 2017).

to war, and prefers conflict management to conflict resolution.⁴⁰ In *A Place among the Nations*, Netanyahu insists that these tendencies demonstrate his salutary emancipation from all forms of messianism, which he indicts as politically suicidal. Echoing Scholem and Walzer, Netanyahu endorses the notion that political messianism – “the idea that history will soon come to its end and we shall reach the millennium” – is the signature temptation of Jewish politics.⁴¹ Noting the prophetic Jewish origins of the messianic ideal, Netanyahu complains, “But whereas many other peoples have been able to distinguish between the ideal vision of human existence and the way the affairs of nations must be conducted in the present, the Jewish people has had a harder time accepting this separation.”⁴² To Netanyahu’s chagrin, influential players in Jewish politics are in thrall to what he considers a “fantasy view of Israel’s situation”: left messianism dictates willingness to withdraw from the occupied territories, right messianism a belief that settlement will bring the (literal) messianic era.⁴³ As if quoting from Rosenzweig, Netanyahu suggests that the lone alternative to “simplistic, sentimental, and even messianic views of politics” lies in constant military vigilance and realpolitik.⁴⁴

Netanyahu skillfully deploys the rhetoric of *ge’ulah* to justify the replacement of conflict resolution by conflict management. Yet the temporality on which he relies also exhibits a marked refusal of *pidyon*. On the narrative that Netanyahu relates, advocates of the peace process evince an exaggerated, even delusional belief in the prospects for meaningful historical change (in the Middle East). The “nonpolitical, even antipolitical approach to the life of nations” that characterizes the left, Netanyahu contends, “holds that history, or more precisely Middle Eastern history, will have a finite end. We will arrive at a state called ‘peace’ in which history will simply stop.”⁴⁵ This tendentious characterization of the left position scarcely conceals the radicalism of Netanyahu’s historiography: he dissents not only from the idea that history has a telos, but from historicity itself, from notions of periodization and

40 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Crisis in US-Israel Relations Is Officially Here,” *Atlantic*, October 28, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-crisis-in-us-israel-relations-is-officially-here/382031/>.

41 Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place among the Nations: Israel and the World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 372.

42 Ibid., 372–373; see also 374. Benzion Netanyahu also complains that Jewish thinkers have historically displayed insufficient political realism. See B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982), 255–256.

43 Netanyahu, *Place among the Nations*, 374, 375–376.

44 Ibid., 373.

45 Ibid., 374.

epochal change. Although Netanyahu presents as “an uncontested fact that the establishment of the Jewish state has retrieved for the Jews the ability to again seize their destiny,” he denies that the state alters the fundamental trajectory of Jewish history.⁴⁶ “You cannot end the struggle for survival without ending life itself.”⁴⁷ Confronted with implacable Arab hatred, Netanyahu implies, Israelis must gird themselves to “forever live by the sword.”⁴⁸ Granted, Netanyahu’s historiography is not altogether free of messianic resonance. Echoes of the “eternal people” topos resound in Netanyahu’s boast that, unlike other nations, who remain subject to a natural lifecycle, the Jews “refused to die.”⁴⁹ What is most striking about Netanyahu’s historical imagination, however, is the adamant refusal of redemption in both senses.

On Netanyahu’s narrative, history has no telos, but it also admits of no release. The *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony recognizes the constitutive force of historical narratives – the legacy of the sacrificial cult shapes Jewish practice millennia after the destruction of the temple. Yet the ritual also prescribes a set of concrete actions that lessen the weight of history. Although history is constitutive, on this view, we can adopt practical measures to loosen its grip. In Netanyahu’s historiography, by contrast, there is literally no reprieve – no course of action that could materially alter the dynamics of Jewish history or reduce the likelihood of conflict. Thus, the prospect that “Jews will be able finally to find a respite from struggle and strife” is dismissed as delusional.⁵⁰ The familiar oppositions of the *ge’ulah* paradigm (e.g., passivity vs. apocalypticism) fail to capture Netanyahu’s political innovation: a calculated, militant, and emphatically political inaction, nourished by refusal to disconnect from history. One of the formative movements driving contemporary Jewish politics is motivated less by the hope for *ge’ulah* than by the refusal of *pidyon*.⁵¹

46 Ibid., 397.

47 Ibid., 376; see also 371.

48 Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu: I Don’t Want a Binational State, But We Need to Control All of the Territory for the Foreseeable Future,” *Haaretz*, October 26, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.5413500>.

49 Netanyahu, *Place among the Nations*, 400.

50 Ibid., 374.

51 One could argue that *pidyon* does have a place in Netanyahu’s worldview – namely, the “ransoming” of the land from so-called “enemy hands” through mundane economic and military practices, motivated less by a desire to hasten the messianic advent than by security concerns. Without denying that the term *pidyon* may capture these aspects of center-right ideology, I would nevertheless contend that refusal to disconnect from or suspend historical narratives remains the signature of Netanyahu’s temporality. Either way, the observation that some on the center right practice a form of *pidyon* only strengthens my contention that the eschatological rubrics of *ge’ulah* are increasingly anachronistic.

I have argued that the conceptual tools afforded by the concept of *pidyon* can illuminate the stalemate that has arrested Israeli politics – a stalemate epitomized by the 2019–2020 election cycle, which saw the same candidates face off three times without a decisive victory.⁵² I would go further and venture that a different kind of redemptive politics – one built around practices of *pidyon* – could empower opponents of the status quo, injecting renewed momentum into Jewish political debate. Unfortunately, the Jewish left has had trouble mounting a forceful opposition, in part because it is trapped in a *ge'ulah* complex of its own. The Zionist left is too busy policing theological delusions of *ge'ulah* on the religious right to grasp the depth of the geopolitical dislocations reshaping Jewish politics in the wake of Oslo's demise.⁵³ Admittedly, it may be imprudent to ascribe too much diagnostic power to the Zionist left's unprecedented electoral nadir in the third Israeli election of 2020.⁵⁴ It is not altogether surprising, however, that a political movement dedicated to the proposition that a Jewish nation-state can exemplify liberal values increasingly struggles to retain, let alone expand, its constituency. Elsewhere, I have argued that we are approaching the end of the nation-state period within the history of Zionism – as the nation-state is subject to increasing challenge from competing visions for Jewish politics (some democratic, many blatantly undemocratic).⁵⁵ With the demise of the two-state solution, calls for annexation have gained currency, respectability, and international support. (Admittedly, the move toward annexation appears to have lost momentum in the wake of the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates.) The Trump administration's "vision" for peace entrenched what many consider a de facto one-state reality.⁵⁶ The "one state" of the one-state solution is either a civil state or an apartheid state – it is not a nation-state. In light of these developments,

52 The two leading candidates, Gantz and Netanyahu, eventually formed a coalition government which lasted for seven months, collapsing in December 2020. At the time of this writing (January 2021), Israel is headed toward its fourth election in two years.

53 For one example, see Walzer, *Paradox of Liberation*, 59–67.

54 In the election held on March 2, 2020, Avodah-Gesher-Meretz won seven seats, only three of which are held by members of the Labor party. Since the election, Orly Levi-Abecassis has withdrawn the Gesher party from this coalition, transferring her seat to the right-wing block to endorse Netanyahu for prime minister. Subsequently, two of the Labor MKs (Amir Peretz and Itzik Shmuli) agreed to join Netanyahu's governing coalition.

55 Julie E. Cooper, "The Nation-State Law: Undoing the Nation-State?," *Jewish Quarterly* 14 (2019): 14–17; Julie E. Cooper, "The Nation-State Law: The End of an Era," *Palestine-Israel Journal* 23 (2018): 79–84.

56 *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>.

the nation-state looks less like the end of (Jewish) history and more like one chapter within an ongoing, fluid narrative. Yet the political parties, NGOs, and advocacy groups aligned with the Zionist left have yet to release their political organizing from the nation-state paradigm (which dictates the region's partition via the establishment of two sovereign states for two separate nations). This reluctance arguably constitutes a failure of *pidyon*: a failure to suspend – or at least relax – allegiance to historical narratives and political models that no longer speak to emergent political developments.

If the Zionist left invests political energy in campaigns against *ge'ulah*, the radical left is increasingly energized by the pursuit of *ge'ulah* (understood as “the vision of universal redemption, of justice and peace for all”).⁵⁷ In America, the intersectional Jewish left that has sprung up in opposition to the occupation (and to Israeli policy more generally) seeks to reclaim Judaism from what it decries as Zionism's “false messianism.”⁵⁸ Determined to reimagine “American Jewishness along non-Zionist, antimilitarist, universalist, and prophetic lines,” these movements ascribe profound theological significance to anti-occupation work and Palestine solidarity activism.⁵⁹ The ethical vision that animates non-Zionist theology echoes Rosenzweig's redemptive temporality, for it positions Judaism outside of violence, war, and statecraft. Determined to avoid “complicity” with Zionism and the exertion of Jewish power, these activists promote an ahistorical, essentialist valorization of “the diasporic as most authentically Jewish.”⁶⁰ Although vigilant against the slightest hint of Jewish exceptionalism, contemporary anti-Zionists nevertheless ascribe a redemptive role to Judaism, that of deconstructing the sovereign pretensions of world politics.

If liberal Zionism appears increasingly moribund, these groups have generated enviable enthusiasm among Jewish youth (especially in North America). Yet their ability to challenge the hegemony of the status quo is compromised by a misguided ethic that predicates *ge'ulah* on renunciation of power – as well as a resistance to *pidyon* that unnecessarily complicates coalition building. In Israel and in the United States, the radical left extols “solidarity” as the basis for political mobilization. “Solidarity itself is a spiritual action and a form of moral agency that embraces the struggles against racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, militarism, and antisemitism, as these are

57 Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 162.

58 See Omer, *Days of Awe*, 162; Benjamin Balthaser, “Finding God in Solidarity,” interview with Rabbi Brant Rosen, *Jacobin*, July 20, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/07/tzedek-chicago-israel-palestine-judaism>.

59 Omer, *Days of Awe*, 154.

60 Ibid., 266.

interlinked.”⁶¹ Proponents of solidarity are correct to stress the importance of building broad-based alliances. In its current acceptation, however, “solidarity” demands unwavering fealty to controversial historical narratives, narratives which purport to disclose the fundamental unity between apparently diverse struggles. The intersectional left increasingly deploys historical paradigms – e.g., Zionism as settler colonialism – as ideological litmus tests for membership. Too often, the historiographic prerequisites for “solidarity” scuttle the prospects for coalition-building, as dissenters from the anointed narratives are disqualified as partners. In its zeal for “solidarity,” the radical left has forgotten the more mundane arts of coalition building in pursuit of concrete policy goals.⁶² Here, failure to practice *pidyon* – to uncouple political organizing from adherence to historical narratives, no matter how formative – risks narrowing the constituency for opposition to the occupation and discrimination against Israel’s Palestinian citizens.⁶³

The world’s redeemability – or lack thereof – has been a consuming preoccupation of Jewish politics since the early twentieth century. Yet this eschatological framing reflects an unduly narrow understanding of the dynamics and possibilities of redemptive politics. The time has come to reintroduce the more mundane redemptive idioms of *pidyon* – idioms that are derived from theistic traditions but nevertheless resist the eschatological imperative. Received cautions against the twin dangers of messianic politics are no longer sufficient to illuminate our predicament, at a moment when calculated inaction has proved the decisive factor in entrenching, dignifying, and exacerbating a patently unjust state of affairs. Indeed, reliance on the frameworks of *ge’ulah* is liable to divert attention from historical dislocations and hamper initiatives to mount a

61 Ibid., 266.

62 For one example of insistence on solidarity at the expense of coalition building, see the refusal of the three MKs from the Balad faction within the Joint List party to endorse Benny Gantz as prime minister after the September 2019 election. “Only 10 Joint List MKs Back Gantz; Netanyahu on Course to Attempt Coalition 1st,” *Times of Israel*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/joint-list-tells-president-only-10-of-its-13-members-are-backing-gantz-for-pm/>. On my reading, the ten Joint List MKs who endorsed Gantz in September were practicing a form of *pidyon*, uniting around concrete policy goals despite sharp differences surrounding ideology, the justice of Zionism, and the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – while the three dissenters remained beholden to a *ge’ulah* paradigm of politics. In the subsequent election of March 2020, however, the Balad MKs joined the other members of the Joint List to unanimously endorse Gantz.

63 The sole voices who have succeeded in generating a modicum of enthusiasm on the Israeli left are those working to build Jewish-Arab coalitions around specific policy goals – without making consensus around historical narratives an obligatory basis for political organizing. See Dov Henin and Dani Filc, *What to Do Now* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2019) [Hebrew].

forceful, broad-based opposition. As scholars have noted, Rosenzweig's adoption of the redemptive vision of *ge'ulah* was predicated on his conviction that the nation-state "is a thing of the past."⁶⁴ Of course, the nation-state has proved more resilient than Rosenzweig (and many contemporary commentators) imagined. Although wary of pronouncements regarding the fortunes of the nation-state as such, I would nevertheless venture a cautious diagnosis regarding the nation-state's decline as the political ideal animating Jewish politics. The nation-state has begun to lose its veneer of obviousness as the best or only solution to the Jewish question. In our time, as in Rosenzweig's, shifts in the political imagination require a renovation of political and interpretive frameworks. As the two-state solution recedes from public discourse, the urgent task for the left is neither to tame messianic excesses via liberal legislation nor to redraw borders to create the closest possible correspondence between nation and state. Rather, the challenge is to envision a regime that extends rights of democratic participation to all of the region's inhabitants, without denying the salience of national membership for Israelis and Palestinians.

As old ideological configurations crumble, the – redemptive but non-messianic – hope is that more capacious forms of self-determination may emerge. A movement to nurture such hopes would require unexpected political alliances built upon practices of *pidyon*. In this context, *pidyon* might mean redeeming the debt owed to earlier generations to facilitate a release *into* history and politics – again, defined in terms of mundane forms of negotiation and exchange. In more concrete terms, *pidyon* might involve acknowledging fidelity to political ideals that animated modern Jewish nationalism – ideals such as autonomy and self-determination – while releasing the grip of the political forms in which they have historically been instantiated (e.g., the nation-state). The political promise of *pidyon* is that, when we trust that the past can be redeemed, the weight of history becomes less burdensome, with the result that we are no longer tempted to flee into eternity.

64 Pollock, "Nation State to World Empire," 338.