

“Who Needs a Messiah?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Why a Messiah? A non-Jewish correspondent recently wrote, asking why does God not bring redemption — what need is there for a Messiah?

Answering this question turns us to the heart of a deep Jewish belief; the world is God’s, but its fate belongs to us. “The heavens are God’s, but the earth God has given to human beings,” writes the Psalmist. (Ps. 115:16) Or to put it another way, as one Rabbi taught, “God speaks the language of human beings.”

For every accomplishment and personality we can ask the same question — what need is there for Moses, for Joshua, for Ruth? Yet the world is less an arena for God’s display of might than for humanity’s struggle to grow. The Kotzker Rebbe wryly said that he could resurrect the dead, but he chose to do something more difficult — to resurrect the living. God can work miracles, but how much more important it is for us to do so.

In the Jewish tradition the Messiah is a human being. The task of the Divine is not to do all, but to inspire us to do much. As Browning wrote, “But a man’s reach should exceed his grasp — or what’s a heaven for?”