HIDDEN APOCALYPTIC MESSIANISM IN
LATE MEDIEVAL JEWISH THOUGHT

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Human culture is founded by and large on rational thought, and therefore a person whose worldview includes motifs from the world of fantasy and imagination is likely to experience significant difficulties. Such difficulties are even greater for a philosopher who expresses his views in writing and shares them with the public. Philosophers thus may avoid recording fantastic views, or, alternatively, may adopt a writing style that enables them simultaneously to hint at and conceal fantastic ideas. By way of example, in the following I show how, in his Sefer ha-Ikkarim, Rabbi Joseph Albo, a Jewish philosopher who lived in Christian Spain in the late Middle Ages (c. 1380–1444 C.E.), seems to have adopted a messianic viewpoint that displayed clearly fantastic characteristics but strove to conceal this view.

Dov Schwartz has provided an in-depth analysis of the history of the messianic idea in medieval Jewish thought. He distinguishes between two central messianic concepts, naturalistic and apocalyptic. Naturalistic messianism is a rational understanding of the messianic idea. According to this conception, the future redemption promised in the prophets’ writings will take place within history and will be expressed through the rectification of the existing world, in other words, through the improvement of the social-political reality. This perfected reality will also lead to the alteration of the individual, who will be able to dedicate his time and energy to intellectual-religious life as a means of achieving human perfection. In contrast, apocalyptic messianism reflects a fantastic understanding of the messianic idea. According to this theory, the promised redemption means a significant change in the universe, represented in the destruction of the existing world and the construction of a new world governed by new laws of nature.

1 See D. Schwartz, Ha-ra’ayon ha-meshihi ba-hagut ha-yehudit bi-yemei ha-beinayim (Ramat Gan, 1997) (below, Ha-ra’ayon).
Attainment of redemption according to this approach entails a series of catastrophic and mythic events.

I argue that Albo held an apocalyptic messianic view or at least did not completely reject some of its components. However, for political and social reasons, he tried to hide his view from most of his readers, openly declaring his support for naturalistic messianism. To support this understanding of Albo’s thought, in the first and main part of the discussion I analyze the central section of his book, in which Albo addresses the messianic issue, and I point out the literary techniques he uses in his discussion in order to achieve his goal. In the second part of this discussion, I examine a number of motives that may have led Albo to use an esoteric writing style when discussing this issue.

In Sefer ha-Ikkarim, part 4, chapters 30–41, Albo offers a broad discussion on the meaning of the reward and punishment given to humanity in the World to Come. In these chapters, Albo presents two opposing views on the issue of reward and punishment, reflecting the two contrasting understandings of the messianic concept. Naturalistic messianism is represented by Maimonides, who argues that reward in the World to Come is for the soul alone, suggesting the continued existence of man’s intellect. Apocalyptic messianism is represented by Nahmanides, who argues that reward and punishment in the World to Come is for both the soul and body, and that, in the messianic age, matter will have eternal existence. The main criterion that distinguishes naturalistic and apocalyptic messianism, and which arises from this controversy on

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