

A long way to go (*Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20*)

Our happiness is incomplete.

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December 23, 2019

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There is a small technical glitch, very small, at the start of the final acclamation of Isaiah 9:2-7: "His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom."

To make a long story simple, the Hebrew word for "grow" has an *m* in the middle, but oddly, here the letter is written in the form you might expect to find instead at the end of a word.

Christians might brush this aside as a scribal error, but Jewish scholars have long been fascinated by it. Because the final form "closes a wall," it represents to some a kind of seal or perfection. To some, who take this text as a coronation hymn, this indicates God's desire to anoint Hezekiah as the messiah. Others see it as foreshadowing the final battle between Gog and Magog. I cheerfully admit to not understanding the logic.

Still other rabbis think that it serves as a warning against judgmentalism: don't look at others as open walls and yourself as closed, they say.

But the most delightful and fitting take might come from the Kav HaYashar:

This is to tell you that although we are filled with gladness and rejoicing on our festivals, nevertheless we pray for the promised redemption. For our happiness will only be complete when the Holy One Blessed is He rejoices

with Tziyon and Yerushalayim.

There is always a risk of cultural appropriation in quoting such a text. We should be clear, then, that its author had no intention of speaking to the birthday of the man Christians proclaim to be the messiah. Rabbi Kaidanover, like all Jews, looked to a savior yet to come.

At the same time, there is a word here for Christians. However much gladness and rejoicing we want to squeeze into Christmas, there is something curiously incomplete about it. Though Luke's angels inform the shepherds that the anointed one has already been born, the promised redemption he is to bring remains just that: a promise not yet fulfilled.

We see this almost immediately in Simeon's dark warnings of rising and falling and swords that will pierce hearts, and in Matthew's grim recounting of massacred infants. Despite Christmas's celebration of new life, taking its stories as a whole reminds us that death and oppression are still very much a part of our world.

Jews look for a messiah to come. Christians look for a messiah to return. Where the traditions overlap is in realizing that our happiness is incomplete.

Christmas, like all Christian holidays, is a celebration of new beginnings, new life, given against and in the face of the finality and death that appear to rule our world. The yearning that is so characteristic of the holiday is not entirely ginned up by Hollywood, but the nostalgia for family dinners, snow, and sleigh bells in the distance is misplaced.

If I were to take a lesson from this textual glitch, it would be this: there is never a closed wall with this God, never a final form, but only openness and a future into which we are being led. Neither is there perfection—the *m* is, after all, misplaced—but always the coming of the perfect into the midst of imperfection.

Christmas is not about a savior being crowned. It is the story of a savior who appears to the world as a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. He has to grow into his role, and so do we. On Christmas, we are reminded of what a long way we have to go. But we are also reminded that the journey starts new every day.