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Passover and the Search for the Missing Prophet, 1966.

Passover and the Search for the Missing Prophet
Daniel Jeremy Silver
April 3, 1966

I titled this lecture, as you know, Passover And The Search For The Missing Prophet. For awhile this morning I was tempted to preach another sermon. It was called Passover, The Search For The Missing Father. I went this morning into the first assembly in our school. It's the religious service for the kindergarten children and the first and the second grade, the very young ones. I went in specifically to talk to them for a minute or two about the Passover. We spoke about the rituals and the Seder and I said, you know, Passover is the holiday in which we eat matzah for seven days, and a little girl raised her hand and I called on her and she said, I eat matzah for seven days and my father makes a sandwich every day to take to work and it's made out of bread. Some place in this congregation there is a missing father.

In the ninth pre-Christian century there arose in ancient Israel a towering and majestic figure, Eliahu Hanovi, Elijah the prophet, or as he is introduced to us in Scripture, Elijah the Tishbite of those who settled in Gilead. Now, such was the impress of his mysterious and magnificent character that he became a legend even in his own time, and that somehow the thrust of his personality has communicated itself across the ages. After all, you and I, children of a no-nonsense realistic age, will set a place for him at our Seder table tomorrow night and we'll bestir ourselves during the meal to open the door that Elijah may know that he is welcome. Why is it that we are so eager to welcome this mantled and fierce-eyed prophet as a guest at our festival of freedom? And how is it that this man who spoke fearlessly the word of God became over the ages the patron saint of home and family and the proclaimed herald of the messiah? Now, credulity and piety and legend-making, of course, played its part, but we seem to be dealing in Elijah with one of those promethean beings whose eye burns with an inner fire, whose voice speaks with a tone which seems to come down directly from the heavens, with one of these men, these rare men, who is in the world as we know it but not of the world

as we know it, who impresses his age as being drawn in larger than human terms, as having become in some way the visible living conscience of his time. How did Elijah, the man, become Elijah, the legend?

We cannot unravel any more a three thousand year perspective of this mystery, but this much we do know, that the legend of Elijah was quickly born. Elijah is one of the real characters of Biblical history, yet, even in Biblical time, becomes part of the folklore and the living legend of our people. I read to you this morning from the last chapter of the prophet Malachai in which this prophet or some anonymous prophet whose works have been added to those of Malachai says that in the end of days the legendary Elijah will come, and as a magnificent marriage counselor he will turn the hearts of the children to the parents and the hearts of the parents to the children, there will be long-lasting amity in the homes and understanding between the generations; and he says further, that the Lord God will send unto us before the great and awesome day of deliverance Elijah the prophet. Now, the editors of the Bible took this last promise, so crucial and critical, that they repeated it as the very last verse of the very last book of prophecy. Here is Israel's pledge of redemption. This pledge is repeated in our literature and our folklore time and time again. Elijah will appear. He is not the messiah, but he is the herald of the messianic time. When he comes. When he comes people will know the time of redemption, from homelessness and tyranny and oppression is at hand, the time, the good times are here. You will find this in our literature. You will find this in our legend. You will find this illuminated in the medieval gadot where often you will see the image of Elijah, bestride the white donkey on whom symbolically the messiah is to be mounted for his entrance into Jerusalem, the shofar, the horn of redemption, of salvation, held high in hand, from his mouth the words, behold, peace has been proclaimed unto the world.

Now, when Elijah first appears in Scripture in the Book of Kings he is already veiled from us in legend and poetry and this itself is passing strange for the Bible is uniquely a human book, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses,

David, these are ordinary human beings cut from the same cloth as we are. Their wisdom and their triumph is the very same kind of wisdom and triumph that we may achieve when we grow and mature and confront our world honestly. And like the other literatures of antiquity which told of super heroes, of gods become men and men become gods, of the immortals, our literature, the literature of men seeking for God, of men seeking enlightenment, of men, always of mortal men. Elijah is the classic exception. When Elijah first appears to us in Scripture he is already the wonder worker, the faith healer, the larger-than-life conscience of his age. Elijah remains a man who does not grow and mature as other men grow. He appears on the stage of history full-blown, the spokesman of God, and he remains throughout his brief history God's spokesman to man.

Moses performs a political task. He frees the slaves. Isaiah performs a divine task, he resurrects the dead. Moses dies and he is buried as all men must be buried. Elijah is to die, but instead of death he is translated into the heavens. And the Bible tells us that he and Elisha, his disciple, were walking along and talking and, behold, chariots afire and horses afire and the two were parted asunder. Elijah was taken up into the heavens as with a whirlwind.

Now, this man who from the very beginning is somehow larger than life, supernatural, does not leave us in Scripture any teaching, any proverb, any philosophy, any rule; nor can we follow his growth. Rather, we see only the fanaticism, the burning fire of his concern and of his commitment. Rather, we are impressed with his spirit. It is that spirit which I should like to examine with you for a few minutes this morning and I should like to do so by asking this question. How is it that the holy man and the holiday were joined? Why do we open our door for Elijah? Why do we prepare for him a place at our table? There is no conjoining of Passover and Elijah in the Biblical narrative itself. To understand this union you must understand the full meaning of our Passover. Passover celebrates freedom, especially that first deliverance from Egypt. We were slaves unto Pharaoh in

Egypt and the Lord our God delivered us with a mighty hand. Passover celebrates the exodus from Egypt and it celebrates all the subsequent deliverance and salvation which Israel enjoyed through the grace of God, so we read in the Haggadah, should enemies again assail us the remembrance of the deliverance from Egypt will inspire us with the necessary courage to carry on. Passover celebrates the first deliverance and all deliverance and the possibility of deliverance from all tyranny and all oppression, even from the tyranny of our own senses and of our own passions. So it is that when we raise the matzah Seder night we say, this is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt, all who are hungry come and eat, all who are in want come and celebrate the Passover with us. May it be thy will O Lord our God to free all men from subjugation and enslavement. Next year at this season may the whole household of Israel be free.

Passover celebrates freedom, consecrates hope. Elijah personifies freedom and incarnates hope and the wedding, the union of holy men and holiday was a most natural one. The first Passover, we are told in our Bible, was a night of anxiety and of worry. Would the Lord bring on the redemption? Often, through the generations, Passover became again a watch night. Could the Lord bring a ray of light, some hope into the darkness of persecution, the blackness of the ghetto? Could he calm the mob which raged through the ghetto that Easter Sunday. The men looked out of their doors and looked around eagerly, hopefully, ^{where} Elijah the prophet, the herald of salvation, might be. But what of us, we who no longer believe Elijah will come to our door. Why do we continue the ritual of Elijah, of setting a place for him at our table? We, too, need to take hope into our homes and into our hearts for it is hard to have faith and confidence and be encouraged in an age in which planes cruise above us armed with bombs of the war ready, where there is violence in the streets and violence between the races and violence in Vietnam, where the cold war burns hot at the edges and the edges are burned off and come closer and closer to the core. It is hard to believe that there is a possibility

of adjusting to problems of the world, that there is a possibility of peace, of a larger justice for all men, that we need to hold on to that faith. We need to welcome at the moment when we consecrate ourselves again to the cause of freedom, we need to welcome home into our hearts for it is hope which keeps us steadfast, for it is hope which keeps us at our work, for it is hope which keeps us at our civic duty. Without hope men turn into themselves, they turn away from the community, burdened with hope for hope is a burden as well as a blessing, men assume their responsibilities and strike out to serve God and man.

Hope, you know, is often ticked off as unreasonable, and I suppose if we are cold-eyed and calculating hope is unreasonable. In the short terms the best laid plans of men are aborted, violence rages, tyranny undermines freedom, but is there not a higher and a larger aspect to our wisdom, to our realism? Is it not true that man has despite a thousand setbacks pulled himself out of the primal mire, stumbled and clawed his way part way up the ladder of civilization? So we cannot object that he who personifies hope is clothed in somewhat supernatural garb for it is hard to outline logically, to prove philosophically that hope is part of life, that there can be the day when every man will sit under his vine and under his fig tree and none will make him afraid. Much argues against it, God argues for it. History argues for it. Elijah argues for it. So perhaps unsurprisingly the Bible presents us Elijah without preamble, as a miracle worker in the name of God. Elijah, the Tishbite, from among the settlers of Giliad said unto Ahab: as the Lord liveth before whom I stand there shall be no more dew nor rain all these years until I will it. Ahab, king of Israel, worshipped the God of Israel, but he worshipped other gods as well. And the Israelites that followed him worshipped the God of Israel, but they also worshipped under every leafy tree and every high place the local fertility cults of the land. Elijah calls down punishment upon the people and the heavens are shut tight at his word and they are shut tight and remain tight. For three years no rain comes upon the land. There is drought and famine. Elijah can not only command the heavens to be shut but when he flees east of the Jordan to escape the wrath of his

people he is provided for miraculously. He hides out in a cave. Before the cave there is one of those wilderness streams which flows a week or two during the rainy season of the year and for the rest of the year is only a depression in the land. While Elijah is in the cave the stream flows freely. And his meal and his food is provided for him by the rains, by the birds who airlift to him his needs. Legend, of course, embroidered the miracle working of Elijah. He becomes a divinely sent bat man who time and again saves the sage and the saint in his moment of great distress. It is told in the Talmud that a certain sage, Alazar, was imprisoned under false charges by the Persians and he was spirited away from his city to a community ^{some} many miles away that he may be tried in secret, that no witnesses could hear of the trial and come to his defense. Elijah hears, Elijah appears, Elijah testifies, Elijah proves Alazar's innocence. Often the tales of Elijah are tales of daring do. Often they are quite human, humble, homey tales. What more excruciating pain is there than that of a toothache? And the Talmud tells us that a certain sage named Ravi had a terrible toothache for thirteen years. He needed an essayologist. There were none. He needed drugs. There were none. But, fortunately, he had Elijah. Elijah came to him after thirteen years in the masquerade of a colleague of his, Rabbi Hiya. Elijah asked after Ravi's health and Ravi complained of his tooth. Elijah examined the mouth and he touched the molar that was disturbing and the pain was assuaged. And so grateful was Rabi that the next day he brought all of his wealth to Hiya who was absolutely ignorant of the whole episode. He protested and denied that he had been to visit Rabi or that he had any skills as a dentist, but such was Rabi's faith in Elijah Hiya that he presented the man all his wealth and he served the man all his life for having relieved him from all of this pain. So if you idolize your dentist you have a good basis in Scripture.

The genius of our people, however, is something more than that of a teller of tall tales. We have an ethical bent and so it is that most of the miracle tales told of Elijah have a twist, a moral twist, to them. During the days of the Hadrianic

persecution a certain man by the name of Ulash heard that he was on the list of those to be imprisoned and he fled and he fled to Lidia and he hid out there in the house of one Joshua ben Levi. Now, the Roman CIA heard of the escape to Lidia and they heard that he was hiding out, Ula was hiding out in the home of Rabbi Joshua and Joshua was summoned to headquarters and told that if Ula was not presented within six hours the entire Jewish quarter of Lidia would be razed and all would be killed. Rabbi Joshua entreated with Ula who turned himself in. At the last moment Elijah came down and covered Ula with his mantle and hid him from the Romans and allowed him to escape.

But the story goes on. Elijah appears to Rabbi Joshua and he protests to Joshua against his action. But what could I do, Joshua responded, the Romans are all powerful, they demanded the arrest, and is it not written in our law that a man must be willing to give himself over to the secular authorities if his life can guarantee the life of an entire community. Yes, that is the law, Elijah says, but is there not a higher law, and art thou not, a hasid, a pious and wise man, ought there not to have been other possibilities. Perhaps you might have offered yourself as hostage for Ula.

Elijah then is the patron saint of those in need. Elijah is the messenger of God who in a thousand disguises walks across the face of our earth, succoring those in dire distress, being a knight errant to God. But he's not only a knight errant, a saviour to the individual. He is the corporate saviour of all Israel. It is he who will come at the end of days and announce the good tidings. The Kabbalists in Palestine in the sixteenth century believed that the Sabbath was a foretaste of the messianic age. They had no desire to give it up. At hadalah time when the Saturday was becoming the weekday again, when they had to return to the hardship and the bitterness and the bleakness of their lives they sought to invoke Elijah that he might come speedily and save them from leaving the Sabbath and returning to the bitterness of life. And that litany became one of the beloved folk tunes

of our people. It was simply an evocation of Elijah: Elijah the prophet, Elijah of Giliad, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah, Elijah, Elijah.

And similarly the cup that we will place at our Seder table is a fifth cup prepared for the Sabbath meal because it is prepared in anticipation of redemption and the messianic age. Often in the Middle Ages this cup was designed in the shape of a stag. We have one such in our museum. This was to associate it specifically with the promise that was read into the Biblical book, The Song of Songs. Behold my beloved, hark my beloved, behold he comes bounding upon the hills, skipping upon the mountains. My beloved is as a gazelle or as a young stag. Behold my beloved speaks. He says unto me, arise my fair one and come away for lo the winter is past, the rains are over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing is at hand - to which we today can only add a'levay.

Elijah then represents the incarnation of hope. Do not despair, o Israel, however black the midnight, there will be a dawning; however improbable relief seems, however mighty the tyrant, the shackles will be broken. Have we need of this spirit? I believe we have for though we of the twentieth century are so proud of our fingers, of our technique, of our technology, can we really say that we have mastered the anger and the cruelty, the violence that roils within? Oh yes, we have built some institutions of decency and of learning and of healing, but we have built Dachau, and we have leveled cities and we are building the implements which can level the world. We, too, have need of the spirit of hope. But there is hope that is meaningful and hope that is vain. There are people who have hope in the witch doctor. There are people who place their hope in amulets and charms, in the faith healer, in the demagogue, in some philosophic system in some party. Here are the personifications of hope and Elijah gives us guidance for Elijah is the zealous guardian of the covenant. Place your hope where? Only with God. How long, o Israel, will you halt between two opinions? If the Lord be God serve Him; if Baal be God serve him. Idolatry was ripe in Elijah's day. Elijah dedicated his life to purging Israel of that idolatry. He once, we are told, challenged all the priests of Baal

to a great test. Let them come to the top of Mount Carmel and make their dances, and perform their rites and lay a sacrifice and let them not light the sacrifice but let them see if their God will light it, if it will be acceptable to Him. And he, Elijah, alone will prepare a simple sacrifice to God on His altar on Mount Carmel and that sacrifice will become a holy cost, a burnt offering, for God will accept. And the people are brought together. The priests of Baal prepare with their elaborate ritual their sacrifice and, of course, the sacrifice is not accepted. Elijah prepares his sacrifice. To show all of the people how powerful God is he pours water upon the altar that it may be drenched seemingly beyond the possibility of being fired, but a fire comes down from Heaven and the sacrifice is wholly consumed. Elijah orders the extermination of the priests of Baal. Elijah represents the urgency to serve God and to serve God alone. There is a loyalty, there is a hope which is meaningless, which misleads. We trust in a charm. We fail to consult the physician. We trust in our parents. We fail to strike out on our own. We trust in our community. We fail to seek the humanity of all mankind. We trust in a leader. We fail to see his feet of clay. We trust only and He is who is the source of all holiness, of all goodness and of all truth, the one spiritual being who invests the world, He alone is worthy of our hope, He alone sustains, He alone commands. But there is a hope which is vague and there is a hope which is a folding of the hands and sitting back, awaiting for miracles, and there is a hope which is a challenge, a demand, a command. That is the hope which Elijah personifies.

In one of the seemingly few historical sections of the story of Elijah we are told about a certain Naboth. Naboth was a hard-working, industrious vintner. He had a fine orchard in Israel which is right next to the crown lands. Ahab the king and Jezebel his queen coveted this fine orchard. They made Naboth an offer but Naboth was unwilling the land should pass out of his family. The royal couple desired this piece of land and so they trumped up a charge. Naboth was accused of treason. He was convicted on perjured evidence. He was executed. Such was the law in ancient

Israel that those who were convicted and executed as traitors, their land and all their property reverted to the crown. So we are shown the scene in the Bible of the king and queen, arm in arm, happy, chatting together, walking now into their new land when suddenly, wild-eyed and angry and red of face Elijah confronts them. This is Elijah the man, not the super man. This is Elijah the man who might be killed if the king so much as snapped his fingers and ordered the guard to spear this prophet through the breast. Elijah is fearless in the cause of God and the cause of the right. Wilt thou kill, he thunders at the king, and also take possession? There is a higher law than your law and that is the law of God. Therefore, in the place where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth there they will lick thine blood. And we were back in ancient times in primitive ways, but here is a man who has the courage of his convictions for hope breeds conviction and hope breeds courage. There are some who would say to us, hope is deceiving, hope is an anodine, hope is a happy pill. We clutch hope to us as an illusion to make life easier for us but nothing could be further from the case. The man who is the cynic, the man who is the pessimist, who claims no hope has a far easier time of it. He can turn away from life, withdraw from life, intellectualize. The world doesn't need his skills because, after all, the world is going to end in one giant atomic carnage. But the man who is burdened with hope is burdened with responsibility. He cannot escape the still small voice within. He cannot escape the prod, the goad which tells him always, be up and be doing, get you out and serve the Lord. As long as there is injustice in the community grapple with it. As long as there is prejudice in the community seek to be a bearer of light. As long as men are turned against men and community against community, country against country, be thou the harbinger of peace.

Where is Elijah to be found, this missing prophet? In each of us for each of us is an Elijah. Each of us is always present, always near to someone in need. Each of us has within us the capacity to extend the arm of friendship to the forlorn, the shoulder of patience to the distraught. Each of us can bring love to the disturbed, help to those in need. We bear on our shoulders the responsibilities of the

community. We can be and are, indeed, God's agents of salvation. And our work need not be in the headlines among the mighty. We need not be among the strong and the well-known and the powerful of our land to do the work of Elijah.

The story is told of Elijah masqueraded as a poor man standing on the fringes of a busy marketplace in Poland. The sage recognizes him and eager to take advantage of this opportunity turns to Elijah and says, Who of all those in this square will merit paradise? Elijah looks about. The leaders of the community are there, the most important merchants. He points not to them but instead to two of those whom the substantial citizens of the community deem riff-raff, two itinerant actors, clowns, comedians, these two alone, he said, will merit paradise. But why these? Surely there are men of substance and of good works before you. Yes, but each of these men of substance and work lives a life which is largely turned in on itself, devoted to his own needs and ambitions. These two men, itinerant though they be, spend their lives spreading happiness, a bit of laughter. They lightened the burden of many men. It is for this they merit paradise.

And does not each of us have the capacity to lighten someone's burden? And in lightening that burden do we not free him of pain, anguish, fear. And in lightening that burden are we not the agents of freedom. And in lightening that burden are we not Elijah who personifies freedom? And are we not to those we love and to our world God's agents of salvation? Elijah the prophet, welcome him into your homes this Passover.

Before the coming of the great & wonderful day of the Lord

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 of reception in his hands - proclaiming " Now peace will come upon us
and us "

[illegible]

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- a similar case which I know of ^{just} a number - the same the life insurance of
the same person

his eye - most of a people - Egypt was the land
of the dead - Egypt was translated into heaven!

and it came to pass, as Elvial & Charles were about
to depart, that behold, there appeared a crowd of Jews
& many of them entered upon the mountain, & Elvial went
up unto a certain individual to see him.

and as an important source of help to confront the
problem of religion manhood and in religion imposed
difficult - when there remains no possibility of religion
of as if a day for the religion and you can quell -
2 believe not! most of us have great confidence in us -
yet for all we can conceive of confronting - there is no possibility left

ambition and unwieldy
unintentional
unintentional man can be trained to meet that
build to be of benefit to us and to the world, which we can do
in white marks in confronting, in the future world? 2 believe

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ambition of us, which we can do in the future world for us
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For all its ambition, a good ambition in the future world
will subvert to equal ambition, there is no possibility
necessary and ambition in the future world, there is no possibility
there is no possibility, there is no possibility in the future world, but
there is no possibility - there is no possibility in the future world for us
will provide " " it will all work out " more can be done
hope at ambition, ambition, ambition, ambition
philosophy will have no power to help us - Edgar

and must stop. Of course in Germany we change - but we
at intention not just a piece of freedom - of course not to
live to ourselves at home - but we stand out on our own -

"How long can we live without expansion?"

Many experts advice more rather the kind of justice -
justice more in order to reach of justice - and are making a
lot of arrangements and plans for these things. The idea is
we don't believe in industrialism and industrial justice,
which is physically bad when dealing with us and our
own people for these things. Many people are right about industrial

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course that we follow leads us to the best possible end of the
planning of life.

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on the powerful - and of the human condition on the real
can well understand

going on the book to be long

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Kaddish

Friday

Sunday

April 1
April 3

Those who passed away this week

BLANCHE COHEN
AUGUSTA GOLDSTEIN

IDA ROBERTS NORBERG

Jahrzeits

EDITH C. BENSON

JACOB WOLENSKI

LEWIS SANDS

MARY KLAUSNER

EMMA BAKER MYERS

SUMNER C. WIENER

JACOB ROSEN

MATILDA FLESHER

ABRAHAM J. SUGERMAN

HARRY BRATBURD

HATTIE BAER TEPLANSKY

SOL FETTERMAN

LEVI SHONFIELD

ISRAEL J. LEHMAN

ALBERT BERGMAN

IDA DEBORAH GLANZ

JOSEPH MILLER

JOSEPH WEISS

LESTER L. KAHN