

Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Elijah, 1988.

ELIJAH

You may recall the film in which
Monty Wooly played the man who came to
dinner and stayed on and on and on.
Elijah is the man we invite to dinner
on Seder night who never attends. We
open the door for him. We have a place
for him, but he is not on our front
step. He does not sit down at our table.

Why do we invite Elijah? In rabbinic Judaism Elijah is the herald of the messiah, and it is perfectly natural that as we celebrate the festival of the <u>first</u> deliverance, that from Pharaonic Egypt, Jews should look forward to the <u>ultimate</u> deliverance from the burdens of our harsh destiny.

Elijah has always been an exceptional and omnipresent figure in our tradition.

The first cluster of stories about him appears in the Book of Kings. In later folk tradition Elijah comes close to becoming Judaism's guardian angel - part merlin, part good witch of the north. He is a protector of the pious. He is a deliverer of the poor. He is the herald of the messiah. To those who are confronted with overwhelming tragedy he appears as if out of nowhere and turns their fate around.

So we have a story of an Elijah as a Roman senator who stands up to Caesar to defend a Judean scholar who is being tried for disloyalty. We have Elijah as an Arab physician who dismounts from his horse along a country road to bring relief to a Jewish peasant in terrible pain, or Elijah as a Polish peasant who works side by side with a Jewish innkeeper who has been ordered

wood under penalty of death. He appears in many guises and in some act of unexpected deliverance, the guardian angel of the Jewish the on is also a teacher, a merlin who is also a melamed. It is reported that Elijah delighted to discuss the intricacies of Talmudic law with Talmudic scholars.

A certain pious scholar by the name of Anon was a good man and a careful jurist and a student of Elijah's. One day a neighbor brought Anon a small present, worth very little, which Anon turned down because the neighbor had a case before him and he feared he might be swayed in judgment. That, of course, was the proper thing to do. But the neighbor pressed his gift, saying, "Take it and recommend me to some other court, where I will try my case.

Anon wrote a letter of recommendation for the man to a fellow jurist, and Elijah pointedly refused to visit Anon any more. The inconsequential gift to Anon might eventually sway his fellow jurist and the delicate scales of justice might be unbalanced.

Akiba was so great an intellectual of our tradition that we tend to forget that for the first 30 years of his life he was an illiterate peasant. He could neither read nor write. In his late 20's he had the good fortune to fall in love with the talented daughter of a local land owner. This worthy thought so little, however, of this mismatch that when the young people were married he disowned his daughter.

Akiba and Rachel were forced to live in dismal poverty as he pursued his studies. Most of the time the warmth of their love carried them through, but every once in awhile their love was not sufficient to warm the dismal night. On one such night a beggar appeared at the door - Elijah. Rachel had just delivered a child, and Akiba was eager to build a cradle to shield him from the cold. Elijah built the baby's cradle and provided the family with food to sustain them.

Perhaps the classic story of Elijah as teacher was told in eastern Europe. It was told of a certain Baroch who seems to have been president of the local chamber of commerce in a shtetl. Baroch liked his fellow citizens. He felt himself respectable and he respected them. He was proud of his town.

One day Baroch chanced to meet Elijah in the marketplace. Partly out of innocent pride and partly out of a not-so-innocent inquisitiveness Baroch turned to Elijah and said: "Who of all these fine people is going to merit a place in Paradise?" To his astonishment Elijah answered: "No one." Baroch didn't know what to say. His world was shattered. Elijah touched him on the shoulder and said: "See over there," and pointed to a large, loutish-looking fellow coming out of the back alley. That man will merit Paradise."

Baroch had the good sense to listen when Elijah spoke. He went to the man and said: "Sir, you have a wonderful recommendation, but I cannot see anything that justifies it. Tell me about yourself."

The man said: "I am a bailiff, a jailer. I have no claim to virtue except this. I always see to it that paupers and beggars are separated from hardened criminals and that the young who are brought in for their first offense are kept separate from hardened felons." Baroch pressed on. "Good, then, but why don't you at least dress as a Jew? Why don't I see you in the synagogue?" "Oh," the man said, "That's easy to explain. If I were known as a Jew the ruffians would stop talking in front of me and I wouldn't be able to tell the rabbi when I heard of someone plotting to attack the synagogue or to steal from some Jewish person." In this way Baroch learned not to judge another by his appearance.

The same story, interestingly, was told about Elijah and Baroch and two clowns. Circus and theater people and gypsies, as you know, were considered the riff-raff of Europe, thieves and scoundrels. They were outside the pale. You never invited them into your home. You laughed at them occasionally, but you wanted nothing to do with them.

One day Elijah said to Baroch:

"No one here among your respectable citizens will warrant a place in Paradise. But look you there." He pointed to two clowns made up in white-face to amuse the crowd. Why these clowns?" Baroch asked. Elijah answered: Because they bring laughter into the bitterness of life. They help people forget pain and anguish and torment. They deserve Paradise."

In the folk tradition Elijah is part guardian angel, part magician, part good fairy, part teacher of ethics, and part the herald of the coming of the messiah.

What about the real Elijah? What about the Elijah who lived in the 9th pre-Christian century in northern Israel? What do we know about him? The answer is, precious little. The Bible is strangely silent about his origins.

Beginning with chapter 17 of the first Book of Kings and running to the end of that book we have the story of Elijah. The narrative tells of two strange men, loners, and the events of their lives, the prophet Elijah and his disciple, the prophet Elisha. Both men came unexpectedly upon the scene. Their early history is wrapped in mystery and legend. We know nothing about Elijah's

nothing about his parents, nothing about his background, nothing of his training.

One day Elijah simply appears before King Ahab and announces: "The heavens are sealed. There will be no more rain in Israel." We are not even told why God has ordained this drought and the famine it causes. Then a second word of the Lord comes to Elijah and tells him to go into hiding by the Wadi -- river bed -- to the east of the Jordan. There God tells him, you will drink from the wadi and I have commanded the ravens to feed you. Elijah did as he was commanded. The ravens brought him bread and meat every morning and every evening and he drank from the river. When the wadi dried up because of the drought, God commands Elijah to travel west and north to Phoenecia.

He begins to live with a Phoenecian woman, a destitute widow, who befriended him and gave him what little she had for food. Elijah then performs a series of miracles for her. He saw to it that her pantry would be full through the entire period of the famine. He made a meager supply of oil sufficient for the year. When her young son died, Elijah interceded with God and the breath of life returned to him.

What can we make of these stories, of a man whom historians of his own time describe as a miracle worker rather than an ordinary human being? We can dismiss these stories as these stories as the credulity of our ancestors, who were, after all, mosely uneducated and simple people.

Or we might argue that a religious leader, particularly a charismatic leader, must be a miracle worker. The evangelist

must be a faith healer. Earjah's story

A treasury of miracle stories floated around the ancient Middle East and attached themselves to any number of faith healers. In the New Testament they came to embellish the biography of Jesus, as the gospel writers attached some of the Elijah episodes to the Jesus biography. The miracle of the fish and the loaves is identical with that of the widow's ever full pantry. The gospel, according to Luke, suggests that early Christians thought of Jesus as a reincarnation of Elijah. Similar stories circulated about Jesus as about Elijah. He fed the poor miraculously. He healed the ill. He revived the dead.

Was there actually an Elijah or was he simply a wish projection? After all, his name may be no name. Elijah--eli-yahu, two names of God combined as one.

On the other side of the scale there's the simple fact that there are men who seem to be able to do that which is miraculous. There are men who can by laying on hands heal the burden of illness. There are men who can look you straight in the eye and know what you are thinking. And there are men who seem to have the capacity for looking at the shadows beyond and describing something of the future. Elijah might have beensuch a man. Stories speak about him as a compelling and charismatic person. We can't deny him a human history simply because his biography

appears to have been written by credulous folks and is filled with obvious legends.

The Biblical Elijah is more than a faith healer. He is the harbinger of better times. Havdalah, the ceremony which separates the holiness of the Sabbath from the mundane work week, concludes with a kiddish and the extinguishing of the candle which has burned the day long. Havdalah is scheduled to occur during that brief period each Saturday known as bein ha shemashot, between sunset and sundown, which was believed to be the most appropriate time for the coming of the messiah.

It is the custom of our people to sing during Havdalah the lovely hymn of messianic hope which begins: Eliahu ha-navi, Elijah the prophet;
Eliahu ha tishbi, Elijah the Tishbi,
Eliahu hagiladi, Elijah from Gilead,
Eliahu, eliahu bime herah beyamu yavo
aleinu, may He come speedily in our time.

The Biblical Elijah is a spokesman of God. He announces in the name of God that the heavens have been sealed, that there will be no rain. The text does not make clear the reasons this sentence was passed. Apparently God is punishing Zion because the people have compromised with idolatry—and it is Elijah who forces them to compromise no longer.

Omri, the father of Ahab, was a competent general-administrator, who became King of Israel. He recognized Syria was Israel's most formidable enemy, and he tried to protect his flanks along the Jordan and along the Mediterranean coast. He also arranged

a diplomatic marriage for his eldest son Ahab with the daughter of the prestigous priest-king of nearby Phoenecia, a man named Itto Baal.

Itto Baal plays a number of roles in history. He is also the grandfather of Dido, the legendary queen founder of Carthage. For our purposes he is the father of Jezebel, the queen who troubled Israel perhaps more than any other woman in history. WRHS

Jezebel is not only a fair damsel and the daughter of a king but also a priestess of the god Melkart. When Jezebel married Ahab and came to Samaria she insisted that she be allowed to bring her priests with her and build a temple to Melkart.

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Ahab acceded to her request. A temple was built to this Phoenecian god in the sacred precinct of the temple

OF YEB JOIL at Samaria. Jezebel was not satisfied with simply going to her temple and praying. She had a missionary streak in her, and she initiated a series of attacks on the priests and prophets of Yahveh, the Jewish god.

Elijah appears suddenly and challenges Jezebel's 450 prophets and priests of Baal to a contest. Elijah appears as the champion of the true god. He is determined to oradicate every vestige of paganism by king or by commoner.

The terms of the proposed challenge were that one bullock will be offered to Yahveh by Elijah, another to Baal by his priests. Baal's priests could evoke their deity, perform whatever rites they wished. Elijah would build his altar and offer a prayer to God.

The Bible goes on at some length in telling the story of the building of these 2 altars on Mt. Carmel above Haifa. The priests of Baal danced about in a frenzy. They cut their wrists so that their blood flowed on their altar. They appealed to their God to bring the heavenly fire down to light the pyre. They worked at it all day long, but their prayers were not answered. No fire came. WRHS

It was then Elijah's turn. He built his altar and said a simple prayer and the fire from heaven came down. God had accepted his activities and his prayers.

It's a legendary story but an important symbolic one, within it is the challenge brought to Israel by each and every prophet, "How long will you crouch between two opinions?

If God be God follow Him. If Baal be God follow him." There can be no compromise in matters of faith.

Israel cannot have it both ways. Why was Israel alone of all the peoples of antiquity prohibited from introducing into their worship the gods from other pantheons? What was so despicable or unacceptable about heathen worship? After all, the wise men of many nations followed heathen practices. The answer is that Israel's leaders had come to a startling recognition. Where the other ancient peoples worshipped nature, the power and sparkle of natural phenomena, and the powers within nature, the moon, the sun, the stars, the storm,. Israel's prophets had come to the conclusion that it was not the individual powers within nature which ought to be worshipped but only the one Creator God,

the God who orders and vivifies all being. There are many powers in nature but only one Creator who alone is to be worshipped. Law, these are commonplace thoughts, but in those times they were revolutionary ones. It meant that for the first time all the peoples of the world could be considered as one. God becomes the basis of a concept of humanity. Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?

The concept of the oneness of God also helped in the development of science. The pagan world saw nature as a series of separate individual powers, each conforming to its own nature, each a god. With this world view no science was possible. The idea that God was one and the world a single entity, allowed natural law to begin to make sense.

When Jezebel hears about the results of the contest on Mt. Carmel she sets out to kill Elijah. Elijah flees into the wilderness and travels for 40 days. Where does he go? He goes, surprisingly, to Mt. Sinai, the very place Moses had received the Ten Commandments. Elijah is the one figure in the Bible to return there, a testimony to his importance in the tradition.

At Mt. Sinai Elijah has a vision of God saying: "Get thee up to the mountain and turn to the rock." And there came a great wind and the wind burst upon the rock. But God was not in the wind. There came a great earth quake that shook the mountain, but God was not in the earth quake. There came a fire, but God was not in the fire. Then there came what the Bible calls the voice of great stillnes and Elijah knew God. He knew that God was not in the

display of nature's might and power but in the voice of great stillness which lies behind and beyond.

There is no profit in being overwhelmed by a sunset or by the power of the sun or by lightning or by thunder. These are all magnificent displays of nature's power, they all testify to the power of a single God. Yet, they are not God. God is behind andbeyond, the voice of great stillness which wells up within us as we confront the daily decisions of our lives.

The Bible reports that when the time came for Elijah to die, God commanded him that he go across the Jordanwith his disciple Elisha and that they walk along together in the wilderness. As they walked they met groups of Israelites who say to Elisha,

do you know that the Lord will take your master today? Elisha responds, he does. There's a sense of foreboding to the entire chapter.

But according to the Bible Elijah does not die but goes to heaven in a fiery chariot. Elijah is one of only 2 Biblical figures about which such a dramatic claim is made. This tradition explains Elijah's role in subsequent Jewish history. He is still alive, a constant companion of Jewish life.

Elijah records all marriages in heaven and watches over them. He is at every briss. In Europe there was always a chair for Elijah placed next to the seat where the godfather sat when he held the child for the circumcision. The chair was kept empty so that if Elijah should come there would be a place for him, a place of honor.

There are references to Elijah's messianic role quite early in our tradition. The prophet Malachai, who lived in the 6th century, has this to say: I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the amesome day, awesome and fearful day of the Lord, to reconcile fathers with their sons and sons with their fathers so that when I come I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction."

Some 3 centuries later Joshua ben
Sirach, a Jerusalem school teacher who
maintained an academy for the sons of
well-born Jerusalem gentlemen, composed
an epic poem in which he told the history
of Israel through the lives of the great
men of Israel. In the verses which he
devoted to Elijah he tells of the miracles

which Elijah performed and he ends his verse in this way. "It is written you Elijah are to come at the appointed time of warning to allay the divine wrath before its final fury, to reconcile fathers and sons, to restore the tribes of Israel."

this role in the messianic drama because of the story that he did not die because he was seen as such a power-laden, charismatic figure. The identification comes early in the tradition and has remained fixed ever since.

Elijah is our expected guest on Seder night because he bespeaks the message of redemption It is only natural that we would want to welcome Elijah to our Passover feast. If he should suddenly appear on our doorstep the great messianic drama will have begun,

a time of justice and freedom and peace will have arrived in our troubled world.

The haggadah is nothing more than the chronicle of the retelling of the first deliverance. We were slaves of Egypt. God delivered us from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and so redeemed Israel from all oppression. So may He redeem us from all the tyrants who oppress us. The message of Passover is that a time of freedom and deliverance will come. Last year we were slaves,

We think of redemption in more secular terms, but our fathers could think of it only in terms of the coming of the mossiah.

The ritual of opening the door for Elijah is not old. It does not go back beyond the 15th or 16th century and seems to have grown not so much out of the messianic drama as from desperation. Europe knew the blood libel charge. Many in the Christian world believed that on Passover night Jews required the blood of a Christian infant in order to complete the ceremony. That libel against the Jewish tradition is, of course, part of the mythology of Christian anti-semitism. It may come from a misunderstanding of the practice on Seder night which has the leader, as each of the ten plagues are recited, dip his finger in a cup of wine and flick the drop to the floor. The list of the ten plagues begins with the plague dom, the Hebrew word for blood.

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Apparently either someone watched this practice and misunderstood it or an apostate who wanted to defame his birth people and thereby build up status among his new confreres passed around this calumny. Whatever its basis, the story was the cause of much killing over the centuries.

In the ghettoes of the Rhineland in the 15th century the custom developed of keeping the door of the home open on Seder night so anyone who passed by might look in and see what the Seder ritual actually was.

Actually, there was a place at the Seder table for Elijah long before the door was opened for him, the place which we call the cup of Elijah. The custom goes back to Talmudic times and developed out of a halachic dispute among the sages. As you know, we drink 4 cups of wine on Seder night.

We do so because there is a text in which the word redeem is repeated 4 different times with 4 different synonyms. Some rabbis believed that a different verse should be the basis of the custom of numbering the cups of wine, a verse in which the promise of redemption is repeated 5 times rather than 4. Of course, there was a solution to this monumental dispute. We drink, all of us, 4 cups of wine and keep the 5th on the table. Anybody who wants to can take up the 5th cup, bless it and drink of it. With this solution everybody was satisfied.

How did Elijah become identified with this 5th cup of wine? There was an ancient tradition that all unresolved Talmudic disputes will be resolved in messianic times by Elijah. This impasse was one of those disputes and, therefore,

it was natural that the cup be associated with Elijah.

Elijah represents the will of God to redeem. He bespeaks the power of God to save. He is the herald of good tidings. He personifies all that is hopeful and messianic in our tradition.

Over the years liberal Judaism has tended to push such messianic legends aside. They are outside our experience.

They seem to be the product of ancient credulity. But it is necessary to hope. The prophets of Israel describe Israel as the prisoner of hope? Hope derives from the dreams of our unconscious. It comes out of the overflowing heart and the outreaching spirit. How often have we come to a meeting in our community during a particularly dark passage caused by another outrage of the Russians or

the Germans or Arabs against our people and felt encouraged when, at the end, someone said, <u>Am Yisrael hai</u>, the people of Israel still lives.

We draw strength from the continuity of our tradition. We draw strength when someone reminds us that the guardian of Israel neither slumbers or sleeps. If we don't believe them we still draw strength from the Elijah legends. They are illogical. They are unphilosophic, but they are necessary. It matters not whether Elijah lived or died, whether he is alive or not. What matters is that he personifies the hopes of our people, the messianic dreams.

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It do that matter Elijah did not come Friday night. What matters is that we sustain the hope, that the doors of our hearts remain open to

the message of hope, the feeling that beyond and behind the confusions of the ominous headlines of the day there lies a better day. It is for that reason that our national anthem is Hatikvah, hope.



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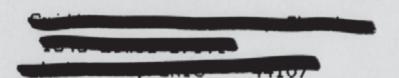
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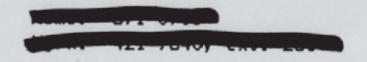
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DEAR ELISABETH,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR: MANY, MANY THANKS:

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

MRS: MICHAEL FOLKMAN 22275 EAST BYRON RD: CLEVELAND, OHIO 44122

DEAR CLAUDIA,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE; IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR; MANY, MANY THANKS;

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

MR. JOEL LIBAVA
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DEAR JOEL,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR. MANY, MANY THANKS:

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

Ms. CINDY GOTTLIEB
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DEAR CINDY,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR: MANY, MANY THANKS:

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DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

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DEAR ADELE,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR: MANY, MANY THANKS:

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

Ms: EUDI SILBERMAN 3008 WARRINGTON RD: SHAKER HEIGHTS, OHIO 44120

DEAR EUDI.

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR. MANY, MANY THANKS.

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

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DEAR MADELYN,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR: MANY, MANY THANKS:

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

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DEAR SHARON,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTI-CIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE. IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR. MANY, MANY THANKS.

SINCERELY,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER



MR: CHARLES WHITEHILL 24001 S: WOODLAND RD: SHAKER HEIGHTS, OHIO 44122

DEAR CHARLES,

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR WONDERFUL PARTICIPATION IN LAST SUNDAY'S ELIJAH PERFORMANCE: IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND A CREDIT TO THE USUAL ABILITY OF THE ENTIRE CHOIR: MANY, MANY THANKS:

SINCERELY.

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER