

## BEING ELIJAH

Many years ago I had the privilege of taking a storytelling workshop with Peninah Schram, one of the foremost storytellers of our time. In addition to all of her other accomplishments, she knows just about all there is to know about stories involving Elijah the prophet. And there is a lot to know. It turns out that Elijah is the favorite figure in Jewish folktales, and there are hundreds of stories, from all over the world. Every Jew knows something about Elijah. Even if you don't know anything else about him, let me remind you that you invite him to your house every year during the Passover Seder.

Elijah lived in Judea during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They were idol worshipers and all-around bad people, and in the tradition of the prophets of Israel, Elijah spoke truth to power. He warned them and threatened them in the name of God and as a result they did their best to have him killed. They never succeeded. In fact Elijah is one of only two men in the Bible who apparently did not die. (Extra credit if you know the other one without resorting to Google) Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot. As he was ascending, he threw his cloak of office down to his disciple, Elisha who picked it up and put it around his own shoulders. As an aside, it's from this story we get the idea of picking up the mantle of someone who has come before us.

Since Elijah was still alive on his way up to heaven, Jewish tradition holds that he is still alive. His ultimate job will be to announce the arrival of the messiah, which will be accompanied by a blast of the great heavenly shofar. In the meantime however he has to be doing something to keep busy. Jewish folklore has imagined him wandering the earth, keeping an eye on things, rewarding the righteous and in general doing God's work.

It's no wonder then that Jews have always hoped for a glimpse of Elijah. When we do see him, he will either be announcing the coming of the messiah, or, if not, he might have come to offer help. Of course, we never know when that might be, but there are certain moments our tradition considers most likely for Elijah to return.

For example, since we were redeemed from Egypt at Passover, there is a tradition that the ultimate redemption, the coming of the messiah will also occur at Passover, and that is why each year at our Seder we wait expectantly for Elijah. By the way, Elijah's cup is not something we put out just in case he's thirsty. It's a result of an ancient rabbinic dispute over whether there should be four or five cups of wine at the Seder. Since they couldn't agree, they decided that we should drink four and place a fifth one on the table. Another one of Elijah's jobs will be to settle all of those Talmudic disputes and so the 5<sup>th</sup> cup quickly became known as Elijah's cup.

So, one tradition says that Elijah will show up at Passover. Another says that since Shabbat is a foretaste of the messianic age, when Elijah comes it will be on a Saturday, and he will announce that this particular Shabbat will never end. This is why we invoke his name each week at *havdalah*, the ceremony marking the end of Shabbat.

Interestingly, Yom Kippur is considered the Sabbath of Sabbaths, and this year it occurs on Shabbat. So who knows what will happen at *neilah* tomorrow evening when we hear the final *tekiah gedolah*!

And there is one other moment when we welcome Elijah the prophet; he is an honored guest at every *bris*. In fact a chair is set aside for him to signify his presence. The original connection goes all the way back to his struggle with Ahab and Jezebel who tried to outlaw circumcision. Elijah fought for its continuation as a sign of God's covenant with us and because of his zealousness he is always invited. However I think that there is another reason we invoke his presence at every circumcision, and today at the naming of every baby girl as well, a reason related to his role as the herald of the messiah.

The ancient Jewish concept of a personal messiah includes the idea that the Messiah will be a human being, most likely of humble origins, and that we have no idea where that individual will come from. What that means is that, as far as we are concerned, every Jewish baby has the potential to be the Messiah. Elijah's presence at the start of every Jew's life symbolizes the potential that each one of us has to change the world.

A story.

The Baal Shem Tov was the founder of Chasidism. One of his disciples came to him and said, "Rebbe, I want so much to see Elijah the Prophet."

To his surprise, the Baal Shem said, “It’s simple. I’ll tell you what to do. Get two boxes and fill one with food and the other with children’s clothes. Then, before Rosh Hashanah, travel to Minsk. On the outskirts of town, right before where the forest begins, is a dilapidated house. Find that house, but don’t knock on the door immediately; stand there for a while and listen. Then, shortly before candle-lighting time at sunset, knock on the door and ask for hospitality.”

The chasid went home and told his wife he would be away for the Rosh Hashanah holiday. “How can you leave your family?” she said. “The children want their father to take them to the synagogue!” He said, “I have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see Elijah the Prophet!” Reluctantly, she agreed that it was something that he could not pass up.

So he went and did as the Baal Shem Tov had instructed. He filled the parcels with food and clothing and went to Minsk, where he found the broken-down house at the edge of town. He arrived shortly before evening and stood in front of the door, listening. Inside, he heard children crying, “Mommy, we’re hungry. And it’s Yom Tov and we don’t even have decent clothes to wear!” He heard the mother answer, “Children, trust in God. He’ll send Elijah the Prophet to bring you everything you need!”

The chasid got excited; the Rebbe was right. This was the place he would see Elijah. He quickly knocked on the door. When the woman opened it, he asked if he could stay with them for the holiday. “How can I welcome you when I don’t have any food in the house?” she said. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I happen to have enough food for all of us.” He came in, opened the box, gave the children the food, and they ate. Then he opened the other box and the children all took clothes for themselves: this one a shirt, that one a jacket, the other one a hat. He stayed with them for the full for two days of the holiday, waiting to see Elijah the Prophet. He didn’t even sleep. How could he sleep? How often do you get a chance to see Elijah the Prophet? But he saw no one.

Disappointed, he returned to the Baal Shem Tov and said, “Master, I did not see Elijah the Prophet!” “Did you do everything I told you?” asked the Baal Shem Tov. “I did!” he said. “And you didn’t see him?” “No, Rebbe.” “Are you sure?” “Yes, Rebbe! I didn’t see him!” “Well then, you’ll have to return for Yom Kippur,” said the Baal Shem Tov. “Go back before Yom

Kippur, with a box of food, to the same house. Again, be sure to arrive an hour before sunset, and don't knock immediately. Wait for a while and just stand in front of the door, listening."

The chasid went back to his wife and told her he would be away for Yom Kippur. "How can you leave your children again?" she asked. "But the Baal Shem Tov says this time for sure I'll be able to see Elijah the Prophet, like one of the great tzaddikim!" he said, "How can I not go?" And she agreed that it was worth going away if he could see Elijah the Prophet.

So he went back to Minsk before Yom Kippur. This time, he went earlier and stood in front of the door, listening. Inside he heard children crying, "Mommy, we're hungry! We haven't eaten the whole day! How can we fast for Yom Kippur?" "Children!" said the mother. "Do you remember you were crying before Rosh Hashanah that you had no food or clothes? And I told you, 'Trust in God! He'll send Elijah the Prophet, who'll bring you food and clothing and everything else you need!' Wasn't I right? Didn't Elijah come and bring you food and clothing? He stayed with us for two days! Now you're crying again that you're hungry. I promise you that Elijah will come now, too, and bring you food!"

Then the chasid understood what his master, the Baal Shem Tov, had meant. And he knocked on the door.

Perhaps neither you nor I are the messiah. We do not need to be. Perhaps we will never see the real Elijah. We do not need to. On this holiest of evenings, so filled with hope and the possibility of change, we just need to remember the task given to each of us: to relieve suffering wherever we can; to reach out our hand to those who are alone; to comfort those who are in pain; to do what we can to make this year a better year than last year, and to make the world a better place than it was when we found it.

If we succeed this year in doing any of that, who knows who we will see when we look in the mirror?