

Stories of Elijah the Prophet from Talmud and Midrash

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Rabbi Sager's original letter regarding these stories is on page 5.

The Leper Messiah at the Gates of Rome

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met Elijah while the prophet was standing at the entrance to the cave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, “Do I have a place in the world to come?” Elijah replied, “If the master desires it.”

As Elijah spoke, Rabbi Yehoshua looked about in wonderment. Perhaps it was only the echo from the cave before which he stood, but later on when he would speak of this meeting with Elijah, he would say, “I saw two of us but I heard the voice of a third.”

Rabbi Yehoshua asked Elijah another question about the future time: “When will the Messiah come? Elijah answered, “Go and ask him, himself.” Rabbi Yehoshua was amazed: “You mean I could *find* him, *talk* to him—now? Where is he?” Elijah said, “You can find him at the gates of Rome.” “How will I recognize him at the gates of Rome?” asked Rabbi Yehoshua. Elijah told him, “There he sits among the lepers whom you will find unwinding all of their bandages at the same time and then covering their sores with clean bandages. The Messiah is the only one who unwinds and rewinds his bandages one at a time, thinking, ‘I want to be ready at a moment’s notice if I am called’.”

Rabbi Yehoshua traveled from the cave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai all the way to Rome—a journey that seemed to take him only a few steps. He was not frightened by the strong gates of the enemy nor the pitiful condition of the lepers. Keeping in mind Elijah’s advice of how to identify the Messiah in the most unlikely of places among the most wretched of people, he quickly spotted the one poor sufferer who was unwrapping and rewrapping only one sore at a time.

Rabbi Yehoshua approached him and said, “Peace be upon you, my master and teacher.” The leper looked knowingly at him and replied, “Peace be upon you, son of Levi.” Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, “When will the master come?” “Today,” said the leper.

Rabbi Yehoshua returned to Elijah in the blink of an eye. Elijah said to him, “What did the Messiah say to you?” Rabbi Yehoshua replied, “He said, ‘Peace be upon you, son of Levi’.” Elijah said, “Ah! As to your first question of me, he assured you that both you *and* your father have a place in the world to come.” Rabbi Yehoshua said, “But he lied to me, saying, ‘Today I will come.’ But he has not come.” Elijah said, “No, he did not say that he would come ‘today’. Rather, he was quoting a Psalm verse to you: *Today—if only you will listen to His voice* (Psalm 95:7). (from the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a)

The Leaves of Paradise

Rabbah b. Abbuha met Elijah standing in a non-Jewish cemetery... Rabbah said to him: “Are you not a kohen, a descendant of the Temple priests? Why then do you stand here, in a cemetery where contact with the dead will make you impure and unfit for service in the Temple?” Elijah replied, “It seems as though the learned sage has not studied the laws of purity. For there it has been taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai that the graves of non-Jews do not make one unfit...” Rabbah replied: “Alas, I cannot even make the time to properly

study the most useful parts of the Mishnah that teach me about holidays and everyday life; how could I then study all six divisions of the Mishnah including the very difficult and less useful division about “Purities?” “And why is it that you can not study more?” asked Elijah. “I am too hard pressed to make a living,” Rabbah answered.

Elijah then led him into Paradise and said to him: “Remove your outer robe, spread it out and gather some of these leaves”. So he gathered the leaves of Paradise and carried them off. As he was coming out, he heard a voice: “Who would use up his portion in the world to come as Rabbah b. Abbuha has done? When Rabbah heard that, he quickly shook the leaves out of his robe and left Paradise, returning to the cemetery where he had been before. Yet, even so, since he had carried the leaves of Paradise in his robe, it had absorbed their fragrance and so he sold it for twelve thousand denars which he distributed among his children. (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 114b)

The Trade of Your Ancestors

The young Eleazar, son of the great Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, was determined to make his own way in the world. He would not learn Torah and be a Rabbi and teacher. He would make a career in the Roman government, which his father hated. At one point, the Romans put Eleazar in charge of animals and laborers who could be rented for trucking and transportation.

Elijah, ever remembered for the good, disguised as an old man came to him one time and said to him: “Get a beast of burden ready for me.” Eleazar asked: “And what do you have to load on the animal?” Elijah said: “I have this worn out water skin, my cloak, and myself, as rider.” Eleazar said to himself: “Take a look at this old man whom I can pick up and carry to the end of the world; and he says to me, ‘Get a beast of burden ready for me?’” So what did Eleazar do? He put Elijah on his back, took him up mountainsides, and brought him down into valleys, across fields of thorns and fields of thistles.

Along the way, Elijah began to bear down upon him, making himself heavier and heavier. Eleazar said: “Old man, old man! Lighten yourself. If not, I shall throw you off.” Elijah asked: “Would you like to take a few breaths?” He replied: “Yes.” So, what did Eleazar do? He took Elijah to a field where he set him down under a tree and gave him something to eat and drink. After Elijah ate and drank, he asked Eleazar: “What will all this wandering around get you? Would it not be better for you to settle down and take up the trade of your ancestors?” Eleazar asked: “Can you teach me their occupation?” Elijah replied: “Yes.”

There are those who say that Elijah, ever remembered for the good, taught him for thirteen years until he knew all of Sifra, the ancient teachings on the book of Leviticus; once he was able to carry all of the Sifra he could not even carry his own cloak. (Pesikta d’Rav Kahanna 11:22)

The Secret

Elijah used to come to the Bet Midrash/study house of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi where he would study with Rabbi Yehudah. One day—it was the new moon—Rabbi Yehudah expected Elijah, and waited for him; but Elijah failed to come. The next day, Rabbi Yehudah said to Elijah: “Why are you here a day late?” He replied, “I had to wait until I awoke Abraham, washed his hands, then I waited while he prayed and I put him to rest again; likewise for Isaac and Jacob.” “But why not awake them together?” asked Rabbi Yehudah. “I feared that they would grow too strong in prayer and bring the Messiah before his time.”

Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yehudah began to hatch a plan. He asked Elijah, “And is there a group like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in *this* world?” Elijah said, “There is R. Hiyyah and his sons. Thereupon Rabbi Yehudah proclaimed a fast and R. Hiyyah and his sons were bidden to lead the prayers. Rabbi Hiyyah, with his sons on

either side, began to chant the Amidah. As Rabbi Hiyyah chanted, *He causes the wind to blow*, a wind blew; when he continued and sang, *He causes the rain to descend*, indeed, the rain descended. When he was about to say, *He revives the dead*, the universe trembled. In heaven it was asked, “Who has revealed our secret to the world?” “Elijah,” the angels replied. Elijah was therefore brought and smitten with sixty flaming lashes. So he went, disguised himself as a fiery bear, entered among Rabbi Hiyyah and his sons and scattered them. (Baba Metzia 85b)

Voices in the Ruins

An ancient story: Rabbi Yosi said, “Once I was traveling and I entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah, always remembered for the good, came and waited for me at the entrance until I had finished my prayer. After I finished my prayer, he said to me: ‘Shalom alecha, my master!’ And I said to him, ‘Shalom alecha, my master and my teacher!’ He said to me, ‘My son, why did you enter this ruin?’ I said to him, ‘to pray.’ And he responded, ‘You should have prayed on the road.’ And I replied to him, ‘I was afraid lest the passers by interrupt me’. He said to me, ‘You should have prayed a shortened prayer.’ And so I learned three things from him: I learned that one does not enter a ruin, and I learned that one prays on the road, and I learned that one who prays on the road prays a shortened prayer.”

“Elijah said to me, ‘My son, what voice did you hear in that ruin?’ And I said, ‘I heard a heavenly voice cooing like a dove and saying: “Woe to the children on account of whose sins I destroyed my house and burned my Temple and exiled them among the nations.”’

“He said to me, ‘By your life and breath, it is not only in that moment that she speaks this way. Rather, each day, three times a day, she speaks, cooing like a dove: “wooo, wooo, woe to the children...”’ And not only that, but whenever Israel enters its synagogues and study houses and recites the Kaddish, saying, “*Y’hei shemei hagadol m’vorach/May his great name be blessed*,” the Holy One, blessed be He, shakes his head and says: “Happy is the king who is thus praised in his house! What a thing for the father who banished his children to hear! And woe to those children who are banished from their father’s table.”’ (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 3a)

What is the Holy One Doing?

Rabbah bar Shila once came upon Elijah the prophet. He said to Elijah, “What is the Holy One, blessed be he, doing?” Elijah replied, “He is reciting the teachings that are spoken by all of the Rabbis—except for those of Rabbi Meir. “And why not recite the teachings of Rabbi Meir?” asked Rabbah. Elijah said, “Because Rabbi Meir learned the teachings of Elisha ben Abuya, who abandoned his faith.” Rabbah said, “But that’s not a good reason! Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate, ate the fruit and threw away the peel!”

When they met the next time, Elijah said to Rabbah, “When God studies the teachings of the sages, he now adds, ‘My son Meir, says....’” (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 15b)

Take It Up with the Master Craftsman

Our Rabbis taught: Once, Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rabbi Shimon was returning from the house of his teacher. He was feeling very full of himself, proud of all the Torah that he had learned. As he journeyed, so fully enjoying

his own company, he chanced upon a traveler (Elijah the prophet) whom he thought to be exceedingly ugly. In response to the traveler's respectful greeting, Rabbi Eleazar responded, "Worthless one! How ugly you are! Are all of your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?"

"I do not know," said the traveler. "Why don't you go and take it up with the Master Craftsman who made me? Tell him, 'How ugly is the vessel which you have made!'"

Rabbi Eleazar dismounted his horse and abandoned his destination so that he might follow the man, begging his forgiveness all the while. Rabbi Eleazar followed the traveler all the way to a nearby town.

The citizens, seeing this odd sight, came out and implored the traveler to forgive the offense. Rabbi Eleazar, they told him, was a great teacher. Surprised, the traveler said, "If this man is a teacher may there not be any more like him in Israel!" Nevertheless, for the sake of his fellow citizens, the traveler did forgive Rabbi Eleazar on the condition that he never act that way again. (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 20b)

Their Work is Torah

Elijah once gathered his students, the members of his Bet Midrash, and told them the following story: "Once," Elijah said, "I was traveling from one town to another and an angry and bitter man confronted me with his scorning and mocking of God. I asked him, 'My son, what will you say to your father in heaven on the day of judgment?' He replied, 'Oh! I have some things to say to him on the day of judgment! I will say to him, 'Discernment and understanding of your ways was not given to me from heaven. I am not clever about such things. I have never learned and I'm not responsible for those things on which your judgment is based. How can you judge me?'"

I said to him, 'My son, what is your work? He replied, 'I am a fisherman.' I asked, 'My son, who told you that you should bring linen cord, weave it into nets, cast them into the sea and bring fish up from the depths?' He said, 'My master, with regard to my own work, discernment and understanding were given to me from Heaven.' I said, 'My son, discernment and understanding of how to make nets, how to cast them at the right time and in the right place and bring fish up from the sea is not different from the discernment and understanding of Torah in which meaning is woven and cast in a timely way into the world in order to bring forth the world's abundance. Torah nets, properly woven, catch us and bring us back even against the stream. This discernment and understanding was certainly given you from the heavens. The Torah itself says: *This teaching is not in the heavens...neither is it across the sea...Rather, it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart* (Deuteronomy 30:14).

Then the fisherman sighed, raised his voice, and wept. I said, 'My son, do not feel bad about yourself. You are like others who give a similar reply in this matter, not realizing that their own work is Torah, and teaches the way to Torah. (Midrash Eliahu Zuta, ch. 14)

Hevra,

Each year, as we approach the Days of Awe/Yamim Nora'im, I reflect on the ways in which my previous year's talks have made their way back to me in conversations, classes, and letters. Unfailingly, the most recalled elements of any talk are the stories that they contain—stories of experiences and encounters in Israel, Talmudic stories, and others.

The stories we remember, that we choose to tell, in effect, “tell us;” they explain us, they represent us to ourselves. The stories that mediate, interpret and guide our lives as Jews are “sacred stories”. We trust that these stories will continue to “tell us,” deeper and deeper:

Elijah the prophet waited for me at the doorway until I had finished my prayer; then he told me three things.

It is our nature to tell stories—because stories “tell us.” Elijah stories “tell us” particularly well. Elijah, just there, at the doorway where we greet him each Pesach, brings the story of our largest “self” into our very homes, to our very table. And as Elijah joins every home and Seder table from his time until now, he joins the inner story and the outer story. The prophet, the symbol of our deepest and highest story, crosses our thresholds because we open the door and expect to find him there. We expect nothing less of Elijah than to reveal, to explain and to redeem—us.

Many sermons enlist the service of Elijah stories as examples of deep truths or profound insights that join inner and outer stories. But sermons can constrain a story, harnessing that tale to one galloping point, reigning in its breadth. This year, on Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, I want to let Elijah stories speak for themselves.

My four derashot this year will be reflections on four Elijah stories as told by the Talmudic sages. I will select the four stories from among a larger group of Elijah stories that are posted on our website.

In posting the stories, I put some opportunities in your path. You can bring your own reflections and insights to the holiday derashot, deepening your investment in those presentations by hearing them as a kind of dialogue between us. You are, further, invited to send me your thoughts on any or all of these stories. I would love to be guided by your insights and understandings and would love to know which four stories you would choose to hear.

I am extending a special invitation to the students in our Talmud Torah/Congregational School to write about these Elijah stories. I am offering to produce a small booklet of their commentaries and essays.

While this booklet will certainly not be available before the holidays come to a close, when it appears it will renew our engagement with the theme of Elijah stories and it may be a lovely addition to our Pesah sederim. By having adults as well as children reading, learning, discussing and hearing the same stories, stories that by nature reveal and redeem, we are bringing into the world the final word of the Prophets about Elijah:

Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah...and he will turn the hearts of the parents towards the children and the hearts of the children towards the parents. (Malachi 3:17)

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