

Elijah the Prophet — Fanatic or Healer?

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WHO CAN IMAGINE A PESACH SEDER WITHOUT

Elijah? All of our homes have an Elijah's goblet, filled with wine in his honor. We open the doors of our homes for him and chant the familiar song that celebrates his name, his prophetic calling, and his regional roots. And, according to our tradition, Elijah drops by every Seder on what is obviously a very busy night for him.

But who is this enigmatic character of Elijah? And what does he represent for us? That is what I wish to explore.

In the Tanakh, we are first introduced to Elijah in the 17th chapter of the Book of First Kings. He appears during the reign of Ahab, perhaps the least virtuous representative of the Israelite monarchy during the First Commonwealth. According to First Kings, Ahab had done more to provoke the anger of the God of Israel than all other kings who preceded him, largely because of his idolatrous activities.

Ahab's "worse half" — I think we can safely call her that — his wife Jezebel, was the daughter of Itbaal, the pagan King of Tyre. Notice the connection between the name of Jezebel's father and the term "Baal." Both Ahab and Jezebel had made it their project to wean their subjects away from the worship of the God of Israel and towards the service of the male deity Baal and the female goddess Asherah at a time when both they and their subjects were quite inclined in that direction.

Elijah arrives on the scene to speak truth to power and to prevent the people from backsliding into idol worship. In the well-known story related in First Kings, Chapter 18, Elijah assembles 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of

Asherah at Mount Carmel. He begins by admonishing his people for vacillating between the service of God and idolatry with the famous challenge: *How long will you keep hopping between the two branches [opinions]? If the Lord is God, follow Him, and if Baal, follow him.*

A series of tests and competitions ensue between the prophets of Baal and Elijah (as God’s agent). The result of course is that God is vindicated. The prophets of Baal are taunted and humiliated, and are ultimately pursued to Nachal Kishon where they are all slain by the sword on Elijah’s command.

The biblical Elijah is a fanatical zealot, much like Pinchas in the Book of Numbers — although clearly for a good cause. He compromises neither on principles nor on methods.

But Elijah is actually much more complex than simply the one who is “very jealous for the Lord,” as he twice describes himself in Chapter 19. He is more than simply the slayer of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

We get a hint of the transformation in Elijah’s persona in Chapter 19, where Elijah is granted a vision of God. There he begins to realize that the presence of God is not to be found in the grand spectacle of storm, earthquake, or fire but in the “still, small voice” (*kol demamah dakah*). In particular, the midrashic portrayal of Elijah, and how he has come to be represented to us through history and tradition, reveals someone who is much more multifaceted than the unidimensional figure we encounter on Mount Carmel.

One key facet is that Elijah heralds the coming of the Messiah. This is based on the verse in Malachi 3:23 (contained in the last verse of the haftarah of Shabbat HaGadol, which is read on the Sabbath immediately preceding Passover) in which Elijah’s return is prophesied “before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord.” Maimonides, in *Mishneh Torah*, Law of Kings 12:2, notes that certain sages believe that before the arrival of the messiah, Elijah will appear.

Is that a good thing? More broadly, is messianism a good thing?

On the negative side, Jewish messianism unquestionably contains destructive elements. In its apocalyptic form, messianism very nearly led to the total extinction of the Jewish people at the end of the Second Commonwealth. A mere sixty years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the fall of Masada in 73 CE, the Jews again rebelled against the Romans — this time, Emperor Hadrian — under the leadership of Shimon bar Kosiva, whose name was changed by Rabbi Akiva to Bar Kokhba (literally, “son of a star”).

The new name alluded to the verse in Numbers 24:17: *A star steps forth from Jacob, a scepter rises from Israel*. That verse is translated by Targum Onkelos as *kad yakum malka mi-yaakov v'yitraba meshicha mi-yisrael / a king shall arise from Jacob; a messiah shall spring forth from Israel*. On this basis, Rabbi Akiva, the leading authority of the day, proclaimed Bar Kokhba as the messiah; the Bar Kokhba Revolt was, in essence, a messianic uprising.

It was a complete disaster. According to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, 580,000 Jews were killed in the revolt, a far greater number than had perished in the Great Revolt during the destruction of the Temple. Large portions of the country were laid waste and didn't recover for over 1,700 years.

The Bible describes the messiah as the one who will deliver the people of Israel into salvation. He will bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people by bringing us back to Israel and restoring Jerusalem [Isaiah 11:11-12; Jeremiah 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5]. Isaiah Chapter 11 (the haftarah for the eighth day of Passover) describes the “end of days” as one in which hatred, intolerance, and war will cease to exist; righteousness and justice will abide; and the entire Jewish people will return from Exile. All of this invites, at best, false messianic claims (such as those advanced by Jesus of Nazareth, and by lesser known individuals as David Alroy, David Reubeni and Solomon Molcho) and, at worst, pretenders, imposters, frauds, and scoundrels like Shabbetai Tzvi and Jacob Frank. They create disillusionment on a massive scale when their claims evaporate.

The history of Jewish messianism is the history of *false* messianism. Jews pray daily for the messiah, but what do they do when a claimant to the title actually shows up? They deny him, denounce him to the authorities, or kill him!

Because of these dangers, which our sages well understood, the focus of both the figure of the messiah and how one prepares for, and anticipates, the messianic age was totally transformed following the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The messianic age was postponed to the indefinite future and the rabbis strongly cautioned against any messianic calculation designed to hasten the end of time. “We want Moshiach now” is decidedly *not* a traditional rabbinic chant.

This shifting of the coming of the messiah to the remote future solves one problem — that of misplaced messianic fervor — but it creates a

different one, that of indefinite postponement. The messiah will of course *eventually* come — just not now. Not today.

Not soon.

As Leon Wieseltier has observed, the problem for Jewish messianists is that we wait and we wait and the messiah doesn't come.¹ Gershom Scholem believed that “a life lived in deferment” was the price the Jewish people paid during much of its history in exile for its excessive waiting for the messiah. Whether Scholem's view has validity is seriously debatable. After all, for a people who “lived life in deferment,” the Jews were remarkably productive and creative. But one can certainly say that the messianic belief led to a certain passivity, quietism, and a lack of human agency even at times when human agency was required. The Haredi rabbis who rejected Zionism in the past and who do so today, understood something about Jewish nationalism that is undoubtedly true — namely, that it represented a revolution in Jewish history, that it was a radical break with the traditional past, and that its objective was to overturn a mindset that had been entrenched in the Jewish psyche for centuries.

So, those are the negatives.

The great *positive* of the messianic belief is that it orients us to the future instead of allowing us to remain mired in the past or to despair in the present. In times of adversity and persecution, the Jewish people were able to persevere because of their hope for redemption — their unshakeable faith that the future would be better than the present.

Arguably, this belief sustained and preserved the Jewish people through exile and dispersion. As Maimonides articulated it, “I believe with a perfect heart in the coming of the Messiah, and though he may tarry I will await him every day for he shall surely arrive.” This affirmation, the twelfth of Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith, is the recurring prayer of those who suffer the slings and arrows of Jewish history. It was the chant of those who marched to their deaths during the Shoah.

¹ The comment was made in a discussion with Simon Schama about the Barcelona Disputation of 1263 in “The Story of the Jews,” Episode Two: Among Believers (which aired on PBS in April, 2014). The problem for Christian messianists is that their messiah came, but nothing happened. The world didn't change. There was just as much war and suffering after the messiah's appearance as there was before — which was one of the major arguments that Ramban made to King James I of Aragon in the Barcelona Disputation.

Jewish messianism is Jewish optimism, even in impossible times.

Elijah, the one who heralds the coming of the messiah, therefore represents the Jewish faith in the future, a belief in redemption. He symbolizes the triumph of hope over experience.

In our tradition, Elijah is associated with children, who are our future. He is present at every brit milah. The chair on which the *sandak*/"godfather" sits, together with the newborn child, is Elijah's. As we say at the brit milah ceremony: "This is the seat (or throne) of Elijah the Prophet, may he be remembered for good."

The Seder, which Elijah attends, is child-centered. The youngest child asks the four questions that are really one — what is distinctive about this night? And the Maggid portion of the Haggadah, which is the central core of the Seder, answers that question by emphasizing the need to include children in the story of the Exodus — thereby including them in the story of Jewish destiny. Each of the Four Sons bears some relationship to that key biblical verse: *And you shall tell your child on that day, 'Because of this the Lord acted for me when I came out of Egypt'* [EXODUS 13:8].

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Other elements of the Seder, like the afikoman, are also designed to keep the kids interested and attentive. And when Elijah appears on our front doorstep to be ushered into the house, it is usually a child who opens the door for him.

Thus Elijah stands, together with our children, as the ones who keep our hope in the future alive. This hope is connected to reconciliation, and Elijah is also the great reconciler. The prophet Malachi, in the haftarah for Shabbat HaGadol, proclaims: "He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents."

Elijah resolves inter-generational conflict. In today's terminology, we would call him a family mediator.

So Elijah, that uncompromising man of principle, the one who challenged the people to choose between God and idolatry, the one who mocked the worshippers of the Baal and slew their prophets en masse — this biblical zealot

is transformed by rabbinic tradition into a symbol of optimism and hope who knows precisely how and when to achieve family and national harmony.

In addition to bringing about family reconciliation, Elijah also resolves legal impasse. The Talmud records many instances of debate where, after all argument is expended, no satisfactory answer can be found. When this occurs, the Talmud concludes with the term *teiku*, which in Aramaic literally means “let it stand,” but which was understood by the rabbis to be an acronym for *Tishbi yitareitz kushiot u-vaayot* / the Tishbite [Elijah] will solve questions and problems. In the messianic age, Elijah will provide the answers.

Of all people to resolve legal, intellectual, and moral doubt, our tradition chose this enigmatic figure of Elijah the Prophet — a man of unwavering principles, but also a symbol of peace, reconciliation and hope, to help us navigate our way out of uncertainty.

Perhaps this is indeed a paradox. Or perhaps it is no paradox at all and the message one should take is that only a person whose values are strong and intact can compromise where necessary and pave the way to peace and redemption. I leave the resolution of that issue to you. And on that note of uncertainty I will simply conclude with the word *teiku*.



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