

## ELIJAH THE MYSTERIOUS

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When Reform Jews like ourselves think of great Jews, we think of Abraham, Moses, and the Prophets. We think of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and we think of the great ethical rabbis, Hillel and Akiba. But traditional Jews have another hero who, they say, is as great or greater than any of these. For many traditional Jews, Elijah is the greatest figure of all. They are fond of Elijah because there is something of the mysterious about him, while we Reform Jews tend to be wary of the mysterious. We smile at folklore, as if it were some kind of child's play; and we close our ears to legends because we say, they are not historic. Nonetheless, I propose to you that the romance of Elijah contains something of the essence of Judaism, and by way of calling that essence to mind, I am going to talk about Elijah today.

The story of Elijah is part history, part myth, but both parts of the story tell us something about Judaism, and both parts of the story call us as Jews to a certain kind of imitative action. We begin with the Biblical story of Elijah who lived during the ninth century B.C. The Bible tells us that God called Elijah to serve as His prophet. A prophet was one who served as God's messenger to the people, yes, but especially to those in power, to the king, and to the priest. While the prophet declared the command of God as he heard it, the record shows that no true prophet ever made a pronouncement that was against the Law of Moses. In other words, the prophets were really interpreters and defenders of the constitution as identified with Moses. In defending that constitution, the prophets were invariably on the side of the poor and against those who abused their power, whether that power be secular or religious.

There is a classic story in the Book of Kings which establishes Elijah in this prophetic mould. There was a man by the name of Naboth who owned a vineyard. The vineyard was his by right of inheritance, as it would be his son's and his son's son. The Law of Moses forbade the sale of farm land, for Moses wanted to avoid that kind of inequity which developed in all the countries around Israel, when the rich bought up all the land, and the mass of the people had to work as sharecroppers or as slaves. It seems that the King of Israel, Ahab, took a fancy to Naboth's land, and he offered Naboth some kind of trade. Naboth replied, "Your majesty, I would like to oblige you, but the Torah forbids me to sell my ancestral land." Ahab knew that law well enough, and since he worshipped the God of the Torah, he did not dispossess Naboth. Instead, Ahab went to the palace to brood.

Ahab was married to the daughter of the King of Tyre. Jezebel brought with her to Israel the worship of the Pagan God, Baal. Ahab was tolerant of Jezebel's religion and permitted her to build a temple to Baal in the capital of Israel. The God Baal was not associated with a moral Torah as was the God Israel, and when Queen Jezebel saw her husband brooding, she spoke down to him. "Are you King or not?" she exclaimed! "In Tyre, the King gets what he wants." Whereupon Jezebel left the palace to arrange for the forceful displacement of Naboth. The Queen, who believed that might makes right, paid for two men to say they had heard Naboth cursing the King. Naboth was killed for his alleged treason after a fraudulent trial, and Ahab took over Naboth's land. At the moment that Ahab was surveying his newly acquired property, the prophet Elijah arrived to condemn him. In spite of the obvious danger to his own life,



the prophet declared, "Have you killed and also taken possession, my King? Thus saith the Lord: 'In the very place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs will lick your blood.'" All during his career as prophet, Elijah managed this same kind of courage, defending the powerless against those in power, risking his life that the constitution, the Torah, might be preserved.

After Elijah ceased to be, we cannot quite say that he died as ordinary human beings do, he still remained a vital force in Jewish life. Jewish authors frequently involved Elijah as the hero of their stories. In their stories, Elijah was a messenger whom God had sent from Heaven to attack the greedy and to help the poor. Elijah's favorite disguise in these stories was that of a poor man. Sometimes, he seemed to be a beggar. Sometimes, he appeared as a non-Jewish peasant. Always his role was to show Jews the way God wanted them to act - with charity and compassion. Elijah was dead, of course, but he has never ceased to be a living force in the Jewish community. He has never ceased to be a symbol of God's concern for the underprivileged.

Some of the events of Elijah's earthly existence stamp him as an ethical prophet. Other events stamp him as a miracle worker. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah were great ethical teachers also, but they were not miracle workers. Perhaps this difference is due to the fact that Elijah came earlier in the history of Israel before the urbanization process that made the people more sophisticated. Perhaps Elijah had to be a miracle worker, because he addressed himself to the less educated people in Galilee in the hill country. Whatever the reason, Elijah was a miracle worker, while the later prophets were not. Elijah worked many of the miracles that later on are ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament. Eight hundred and fifty years before Jesus, Elijah fed an army on just a few loaves of bread; he caused many bottles of olive oil to be poured from just one bottle; he divided the Jordan River with his mantle and walked over on dry ground. Because Elijah was linked to this kind of miracle, the people held him in a kind of awe which they withheld from other prophets. Elijah was most famous, however, for his healing miracles.

The Book of Kings tells us that Elijah brought a dead boy back to life. The story would suggest that the revitalization of the lad was due merely to Elijah's ardent prayer, but later on, we are told that Elijah's disciple (Elisha) worked this same miracle, and we have the details of that miracle. The Second Book of Kings says that the disciple (Elisha) put his mouth upon the mouth of the child and stretched his body upon the boy's, and lo, "the body of the child waxed warm." Whether this is the first written description of mouth to mouth resuscitation or not, we might well suspect that Elijah and his disciple knew something of healing techniques and their ability in this area established a wide reputation for them.

The Prophet Elijah taught among other things that healing is a divine function and God calls us all to that function. The other great prophets had no time for healing. Elijah said healing is as important as ethical pronouncements.



In Jewish folklore, Elijah is the figure who wards off the Angel of Death. He is the friend of those who are ill. In Greece, certain cults assimilated the name Elijah to the Sun God Helios, and the Sun God, as we know, was associated with healing. Jewish folklore has it that when the great judgment comes at the end of time, and the dead will be resurrected, it is Elijah, returned to earth, who will supervise this phase of the Messianic world.

Thus far we have said that Elijah, both in his lifetime and afterwards in Jewish literature and folklore, was identified with two qualities - concern for the poor and the weak and concern for those who were ill. The figure of Elijah, then, is a model for us Jews to follow in these areas.

There is still a third area in Jewish life where the figure of Elijah looms large. Elijah is closely identified with the Jewish concept of the Messianic Day when all nations will be at peace and human nature will reach that pinnacle to which our God calls us. The Bible tells us that Elijah went up to Heaven in a whirlwind and that he was transported there by a chariot of fire led by horses of fire. All other heroes in our Bible merely die a natural death, but this imaginative description is reserved for Elijah. Jewish mystics have seized on this image and built an entire mystical system on it, and Jewish story tellers have translated this image for their own use. The Prophet Malachi who lived many hundreds of years after Elijah, said that before the great final Judgment, Elijah would return to Earth "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and to turn the hearts of the children to the fathers." In other words, to Malachi, Elijah would be the great peace-maker bringing the generations together. When the Rabbis of old could not agree on the legal interpretation of a certain case, they would say, "Let the matter stand, until Elijah returns to tell us which interpretation is correct." Those who believed in the coming of a Messiah who would set things right in the world believed also that Elijah would return to earth to announce the coming of the Messiah.

Around this last belief, Jews have woven two lovely symbols. I am sure you all know about the first symbol. This is Elijah's cup, Kos Shel Eliyahu, which is filled and left on the table at the Passover Seder with the prayer that Elijah will come that very evening and drink of the cup. The inference is that just as God redeemed Israel from slavery on the eve of Passover, so He will redeem us from war and injustice on this very evening. The symbol has great force, if we take it as an incentive for ourselves to work all the harder to help achieve the Messianic Day.

The second symbol involving Elijah is the chair we set aside for Elijah on the occasion of a circumcision. The Mohel intones, "This is the chair of Elijah, Kissay Shel Eliyahu, let him come and sit with us." Why do we invite the prophet to be present at a circumcision? I can think of two reasons very quickly. First of all, Elijah was long thought of as a kind of patron saint for children. He watched over them and helped them. Secondly, Elijah is closely associated with the Messiah. If Elijah is present at the circumcision, it is an indication that this very child might be the Messiah himself. So with each birth and with each entry of a male child into the covenant of Abraham, there is tied the hope that relief from human suffering and despair is at hand.



We see then that Elijah, as the great folk hero of our people, is linked to three virtues, concern for the poor and the weak, concern for the sick, and hope for a world radically different from our present one. These virtues projected on to the central Jewish folk hero are, quite obviously, virtues of the Jewish people itself. To the extent that any of us does not aspire to these virtues for himself, to the extent that we do not work in behalf of these causes, we are that much less a Jew.

Now, while I deem myself to be as much of a rationalist as any other Reform Jew, I greatly prize the legends surrounding Elijah. I think that the same emotion propelled thrusts that have created the romance of Elijah have also propelled many of us with Jewish genes to do what we do in life. Why are there so many Jewish doctors? Surely not just because of the fact that most doctors make a decent living. You can make a living without placing yourself in that bind where you have to make nerve-wracking decisions affecting life and death. Why are there so many Jewish lawyers? Surely not just because of the fact that many lawyers make a decent living. You can make a good living without having to go to college for seven years to learn how to protect innocent people and how to uphold human rights. Why are there so many Jews in the field of psychology? Why are so many Jews drawn to mind-healing, to the belief that human beings need not live in depression and despair? The answer to all of these questions is that the life experience of our people has helped to shape the character of our soul, and that life experience influences our actions as surely as it helped to mould the image of the legendary Elijah. Elijah does not appear in the many stories about him as a rich king or aristocrat who distributes his wealth to his subjects. The reason for this is that Jews never had the privilege of being the King or part of the nobility in the many lands of their wandering; but Jews were poor peasants in rags, and this is how Elijah appears, demonstrating the power that even the poor peasant can have.

Elijah is the powerless person who somehow has the power to revolutionize the world. So it is with this tiny people called Israel, which somehow has produced an Einstein and a Sigmund Freud. The very first American scientist to win a Nobel Prize was a Jew, Albert Michelson, and the Nobel Prize list is filled with Jewish names, many of whom have made medical and scientific discoveries which serve to diminish human suffering.

Mark Twain said of the Jews, "If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one per cent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of...he has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages: and he has done it with his hands tied behind him."  
(Harper's, 1898)

Heinrich Heine, the great German poet, who once converted to Christianity only to become the greatest defender of the Jewish people, wrote in 1840, "Golgotha is not the only mountain on which a Jewish god bled for the salvation of the world. Jews are the people of the spirit, and whenever they return to the spirit, they are great



and splendid and put to shame and overcome their khavish oppressors. Rosenkranz profoundly compared them to the giant Antaeus, except that the giant was strengthened whenever he touched earth, while the Jews gain new strength whenever they touch Heaven."

On this Yom Kippur morning, it is important that we Jews think about ways in which we can once again touch Heaven. Elijah, that marvelous personality partially grounded in both history and myth, has shown us the way to touch Heaven, but he has also shown us how to touch earth. For Jews the great goal is not to win an eternal rest in a sublime Heaven, but to try to bring a little bit of Heaven down to earth.

Elijah did not try to do this by overthrowing governments and staging dramatic upheavals. He did it by bringing simple kindness to those ordinary individuals with whom he came into contact.

All of us have the opportunity not only to be like Elijah but to be Elijah, for the legend is that he takes many forms and he has many faces. Tomorrow and the day after you will chance upon those in desperate need for whom you may well be their best hope. Some of those in need may not be strangers to you. They may be your own children longing for some of your time - for some of your understanding and forgiveness. They may be your wife or your husband longing for some softness and some attention. Turn your face to such a person and hold out your heart to them, for so would Elijah do, and so God would have His people do.