

Dancing with Elijah

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Although no book in the Bible bears his name, and no writings are attributed to him, there are more legends and stories in Jewish folklore about Elijah than any other Biblical hero. Most of us associate of Elijah with being a visitor at our Passover seders.

Throughout his life Elijah wandered from place to place, with the bible saying that he departed from earth in a chariot of fire, borne by a whirlwind up to heaven. His mysterious disappearance gave birth to the popular figure of Jewish tradition and lore created by the rabbis of a person not bound by time or space who wanders over the face of the earth in a variety of disguises, acting as a celestial messenger. He appears in times of distress and danger, befriending and helping the poor and those in need. He brings consolation to the afflicted. In some stories he rescues Jewish individuals and sometimes whole communities. Elijah is regarded as the precursor who heralds the coming of the Messiah, which is why he appears at the Passover seder and is an honored guest at every brit milah as well as at the Havdalah ceremony at the end of the Sabbath.

Moving freely about earth unrestrained, without regard to space or time, he takes on disguises as appropriate so that his true identity is hidden. He usually takes the form of a poor person or a beggar, as if to test to see how he will be treated. He rights wrongs by rewarding the poor and punishing the greedy who do not share their wealth with others.

A story in the Talmud places him at the gates of the town sitting with other lepers so they will not be alone and to bring them comfort, disguised as a fellow leper. You can tell the difference, though, because whereas the others bind all the bandages of their sores at the same time, he does so one at a time. The rabbis explain he does it this way so that if he is needed to help another he will be able to so unhesitatingly, without any delay.

An example that typifies the many stories about Elijah is of a yeshiva bachur, a student who told his father, the rav, the rabbi of the town how much he wished to meet Elijah. The father told his son, "If you study Torah with unceasing devotion you will be worthy of him appearing to you." And so he applied himself with diligence. One night a poor man dressed in tatters wandered into the study hall carrying a heavy pack. The young man turned the stranger away saying the beit midrash was not a place for tramps, and so he left. Later his father asked him if anybody had come to visit, and his son told him of the poor straggler he had sent away. Immediately his father said that the visitor was none other than Elijah the Prophet, and that he had missed his chance. But for the rest of his life the boy who became a great rabbi in his own right, made a point of saying shalom and welcoming everyone into his home or place of study.

In a story that has many versions Elijah disguises himself as a poor wayfarer who is invited to eat a meal by a poor family even though they themselves have little to eat. Before he leaves to go on his way he tells them he would like to grant them a wish since they have been so generous even though they have so little. The couple asks to be relieved of their poverty. Many years pass, and the same poor visitor returns and finds that the now prosperous couple has a large home with many servants. When he asks to see them he is turned away by foreboding guards. Seeing that the couple has used the wealth he gave them for themselves rather than sharing with others the prophet restores them to their previous status and takes away what he gave to them.

A unifying characteristic of the various stories about Elijah is that the prophet is always anonymous, which brings me to the story I want to share with you.

This August I went to the Wall, the kotel in Jerusalem on Friday night, a little more than a week after my first chemotherapy treatment. It was crowded, packed with Jews from all over the world, decked out in all kinds of dress and costumes and customs. Myriads of minyanim were jammed next to each other. Each group had its own way of davening, its own tunes and style. I escorted the people of our group from one side to the other, to expose them to the cacophony of the wondrous sounds and to see and hear, to touch and smell and take in all the beautiful ways in which with such joy Shabbat was welcomed and God was praised.

We settled upon one minyan, where the singing was spirited, and they were dancing while singing a nigun, a wordless melody that flowed into Lecha Dodee. I was happy to be able to be in Jerusalem, at the kotel and to be able to offer my prayers, to welcome the Sabbath. Truth be told, I was thinking a bit about my condition.

And just then, as we were with these strangers, a man with a short white beard and white hair, and a warm smile looked at me. He didn't just look at me. He fixated on me. He pointed to me and picked me out of the whole crowd in the circle. He extended his hands towards me and with a twinkle in his eye, grabbed me and started to joyously dance with me as the nigun was being sung. It was a moment I will never forget.

He danced and prayed with so much fervor, kavanah and intent. I felt he wanted me to share in the joy, to feel uplifted. And I couldn't help but wonder, and think to myself: Did this anonymous man somehow know? Did he have any idea what I was feeling and going through? Did he single me out for some reason? Did he know the worries, concern or anxiety I was feeling at that time?

I have no way of knowing, and never will, and really do not wish to know. For later as I reflected on what happened I thought, perhaps, maybe, just maybe it was Eliyahoo HaNavee, Elijah the Prophet, who came to dance with me and to uplift my spirit. Perhaps it was that anonymous messenger who is sent for any of a variety of reasons to earth by God to help others in time of need.

The High Holiday liturgy quotes from the prophet Malachi that the prophet Elijah will not only bring peace, but that he will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and of children to their parents. May this new year be one in which we know the blessings of reconciliation, of peace, the blessings of the prophet Elijah.

Amen.

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