

Eliahu HaNavi -- Elijah the Prophet

Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Balak*, the Gentile the prophet Balaam gives us the first reference to the expected Jewish Messiah:

And Balaam said... [I] heard the words of God, and know the knowledge of the most High, [and] saw the vision of the Almighty... A star shall shoot forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel... A ruler shall come out of Jacob... [Numbers 24:12-19]

This passage is understood by all commentators to refer to the future Messiah. But first, the prophet Elijah must return to announce his coming. As the prophet Malachi relates:

[God said:] Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers... [Malachi 4:5-6]

Malachi was the last prophet and those were his last words. So his last words are: To be continued!

Where else is Elijah referenced by name?

Elijah is frequently invoked in our tradition to perform many tasks:

-During Havdalah, at the conclusion of Shabbat, we sing the song *Eliahu HaNavi*, asking Elijah to come and bring the Messiah with him:

אֱלִיהוּ הַנָּבִיא . . . בְּמַהֲרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ יָבֹא אֵלֵינוּ; עִם מָשִׁיחַ בֶּן דָּוִד.
Eliahu hanavi... Bimhera veyamenu yavo elenu, 'im Mashiach ben David.
Elijah the Prophet... May he come to us soon, in our day, with the Messiah, the son of David.

-In the Birkat HaMazon, the Grace after Meals, we also ask for Elijah:

הַרְחֵמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁלַח לָנוּ אֶת אֱלִיהוּ הַנָּבִיא זָכוֹר לְטוֹב, וַיְבַשֵּׁר לָנוּ בְּשׂוֹרוֹת טוֹבוֹת יְשׁוּעוֹת וְנִחְמֻת
Harachaman hu yish'lach lanu et Eliyahu Hanavi, zachur latov,
Vivasser lanu b'sorot tovot yeshu'ot venechamot.

May the All-Merciful One send us Elijah the Prophet, may he be remembered for good, and may he announce to us news of goodness, salvation, and comfort.

-On Pessah, Ashkenazic Jews reserve a seat and a cup of wine for Elijah, and even open the door of the house for him, hoping he will show up.

-Elijah “attends” all circumcisions. Here is why. When Elijah was hiding in a cave, God visited him and asked him “Why are you here, Elijah?” [1Kings 19:9] He replied:

I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant [*brit*], torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life. [1Kings 19:10, 14]

God resented Elijah for badmouthing Israel. The Zohar says:

God said to [Elijah:]... The mouth that accused Israel of forsaking the covenant shall testify that they are observing it. [Zohar 1:93a]

So the rabbis decreed that Elijah would be present at every circumcision to satisfy himself that the Jews indeed fulfill that commandment. The Midrash says:

Hence the sages instituted (the custom) that people should have a seat of honor for [Elijah at every circumcision]; for Elijah, may he be remembered for good, is called the Messenger of the Covenant, as it is said [in Malachi]:

The messenger of the covenant [*brit*], that you desire, is coming. [Mal. 3:1] [Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 29].

-Elijah is said to reappear frequently, sometimes in disguise, to help people in distress and make peace between individuals. Talmud offers many tales of his reappearances. [E.g., B. B. 59b, Shab. 33b, B. M. 83b–84a, Sanh. 98a] Sometimes he is almost playful, as in this midrash:

On one occasion our Rabbis were debating about [Elijah], some maintaining that he belonged to the tribe of Gad, others, to the tribe of Benjamin. Whereupon he came and stood before them and said, “Sirs, why do you debate about me? I am a descendant of Rachel [i.e., of Benjamin].” [Gen. R. 71:9]

One time, the Romans were pursuing Rabbi Meir. Elijah came disguised as a prostitute and embraced Rabbi Meir. The Romans saw this and concluded, “This cannot be Rabbi Meir. He would never act that way.” [Av. Zar. 18b]

-Elijah will settle every outstanding dispute on Jewish law. [E.g., Ber. 35b, Ed. 8:7, Men. 45a, Bek. 24a] In the Talmud, unresolved difficulties are frequently followed by the word *Teku* (תִּיקוּ), “let it stand,” which is said to be an acronym for *Tishbi yetareẓ kushyot u-ve’ayot* -- “the Tishbite [Elijah] will resolve difficulties and problems.”

Who was Elijah?

Elijah (אֵלִיָּהוּ) was a 9th-century BCE prophet in the Northern Kingdom (Israel), under King Ahab (אֲחָזָב) and his Phoenician wife Jezebel (אֵיזֶבֶל), and later King Ahaziah (אֲחַזְיָה).

Passionately monotheistic and resolutely opposed to rampant idolatry within borders of kingdom. His very name means “My God is Hashem”.

Idolatry was tolerated by the king, whose wife worshiped the idol Baal. Attitude was henotheistic: I worship my gods, you worship yours; we can both worship both; they all exist. Elijah would have none of this:

Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” But the people answered him not a word. [1Kings 18:21]

He even accused God of not doing enough:

Answer me, O Lord; answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward.” [1Kings 18:37]

The Talmud calls him “impertinent” for that. [Berakhot 31b:27]

Elijah did not hesitate to use heavy sarcasm towards a group of idolaters on Mount Carmel:

And Elijah said to the [450] prophets of Baal... “Call on the name of your gods!”... And they ...called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, shouting, “O Baal, hear us.” But there was no sound, no response...

When noon came, Elijah mocked [the prophets of Baal], and said, “Shout louder; after all he is a god. Maybe he is deep in thought, or maybe he is relieving himself in the bathroom, or maybe he is on a trip, or maybe he is sleeping, and you should wake him.” [1Kings 18:25-27]

Later, Jezebel sought to kill him. He hid in a cave, and God talked to him:

A great and strong wind rent the mountains... but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. [And that was God. And God told him:] Go back the way you came. [1Kings 19:11–12, 15].

He captured the imagination of the people because of the miracles that occurred around him:

-God had ravens feed him bread and meat [1Kings 17:6].

-A jar of flour and a jug of oil belonging to a poor widow never emptied as she kept cooking, and he raised her son from the dead [1Kings 17:7–24].

-God caused strong winds to take him from one place to another [1Kings 18:11].

-He outran the king's chariot from Mount Carmel all the way to Jezreel [1Kings 18:46].

-He divided the waters of the Jordan. [2Kings 2:8]

-Finally, in a flashy finale, his "death" was spectacular:

A fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared... and Elijah went up to the heavens in a whirlwind. [2Kings 2:11]

Since we didn't have his body, he did not really die. He will keep reappearing mysteriously, usually where he is needed most!

Questions

-Why is an announcer needed before the Messiah comes? (He will come humbly riding on an ass! [Zechariah 9:9])

-Why is henotheism bad?

-Elijah is hugely popular in Jewish lore, the subject of many folk tales and legends, much more than any other prophet.

-Yet he was an uncompromising absolutist. Are the two connected?

-Yet he failed in the end. The Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria, and its Ten Tribes assimilated and vanished from history.