

My Dog, Elijah

David, a nine year old boy living in Canada, tells the exciting tale about his dog Elijah

We have a dog named Elijah. He is a very special dog. Now you are probably wondering why he is so special... and you are also probably wondering why he is called Elijah.

So, I'll tell you.

It was actually my sister Rebecca's idea and it all goes back to one Passover, several years ago.

Now Passover is our favorite holiday – and not just because we get to miss a few days of school!!

[During the entire holiday of Passover, we try not to eat any bread – just Matzah, which is a thin large wafer made from wheat. This is to remind us of the time many years ago when the Jewish people were freed from slavery in Egypt. During their escape the Jews could not wait for their dough to rise and turn into bread. So instead they baked Matzah, which is much quicker to make since you don't have to wait for the dough to rise.]

Before the holiday, we always clean up the house from top to bottom, being especially careful to throw away any crumbs of bread we might find. And Mom and Dad start preparing all sorts of strange and interesting foods for the eight day holiday. Then, on the day before Passover, we take a candle and a feather and search for any pieces of bread we might have missed.

And then comes the Passover Seder. The table is covered with a special white Passover tablecloth we only use once a year. The table is set with beautiful Passover dishes and shiny silverware, candles and cups of wine for each person - even the children! At the head of the table sits the round Seder Plate which holds the matzah, the bitter herbs, the shankbone, the roasted egg, a celery stalk or lettuce leaf, salt water, and my favorite, the charoset, which is made of chopped apples, walnuts and cinnamon. [All of these special foods are there to remind us of our freedom from slavery in Egypt.]

Oh, and I almost forgot! At the center of the table, we place the Cup of Elijah, a silver cup filled to the brim with wine.

Some people believe that Elijah the Prophet, who lived thousands of years ago, never died. Instead, he travels around the world using his special powers helping people in need and giving them his wise advice wherever he can. They also believe that every Passover Elijah the Prophet visits the homes of those who celebrate Passover, and drinks from the Cup of Elijah – if there is one waiting for him. Only he is invisible, and the single sign of his visit is a little less wine in his cup.

Well, our family wasn't too sure about the whole story. But just in case, we made sure to always have a Cup of Elijah at our table. And every year we would open the door of our home during the Seder, for just a few minutes, to let him know he was welcome, if by chance he was in the neighborhood.

One chilly and rainy Passover, about half way through the Seder [after we had already asked the four questions and sang the Dayenu] my sister opened the door. We could hear the rain falling outside, and my sister's hair was wet from just being near the door. As she came back to the table both of us wondered if this was the year Elijah would visit.

We all stared at the cup. Nothing happened.

Suddenly we heard a noise at the door.

Our hearts jumped.

We looked in the direction of the door. What did we see???

Did you guess already?

It was a dog, a big wet dog, covered with thick black fur, and shaking from head to toe from the cold, damp weather.

The dog took a few steps into our living room, then stopped to look at us.

We were all in shock and no one could say a word.

Then he trotted right over to us, placed his paws on the edge of the table, and began sniffing until he reached the Cup of Elijah.

He dipped his mouth into the silver cup and with three huge gulps - slurp, slurp, slurp! – he finished all the wine in the cup, and began to look for other bits of food on the table.

Finally, someone did something.

'Out, out of this house' Dad yelled.

The dog just looked at him.

'Scat', Mom joined in, and they both started waving their hands wildly in the dog's direction.

Their frantic movements managed to move the dog away from the table, but not out of the house. The dog ran into the corner of the room, and slid under a chair near the fireplace and began to whimper.

Without even thinking, my sister and I sprang to his defense.

"No, please let him stay", we begged. "We've always wanted a dog – and he is so tired and hungry. He really needs a home."

"Well, David & Rebecca, I suppose we could let him stay until we clean him up and find his real owner," Mom said.

"We can't just take a strange dog off the street, just like that", protested Dad. "We don't even know his name."

"Yes, we do," my sister yelled out, "His name is Elijah!"

Just then the dog started barking, and ran over to my sister, as if his name had been called. All of us started to laugh, even Dad.

“OK, we’ll keep Elijah until we find his real owner. But don’t get too attached to him, because you won’t have him for too long,” Dad warned.

Well, despite Dad’s warning, we became attached to Elijah almost immediately. He followed us everywhere - around the house, into the backyard, and down the street to the park. It was almost like Rebecca and I now had a new brother.

In some ways, Elijah was even better than a new brother or sister. He was always in a good mood, always wanted to play, and never complained about anything. On the other hand, Elijah couldn’t help me with my homework, answer the phone when it was ringing or pass on a message to Mom or Dad.

The only person who did not appreciate Elijah’s qualities was Dad. “Remember,” Dad would say, “He is only here for a short time, until we find his owner. If we don’t find his owner, we’ll take him to the local animal shelter. Let them find someone else to adopt him.”

“Dad”, Rebecca and I protested – but before we could finish our sentence, he interrupted:

“I wouldn’t keep Elijah for all the money in the world! Case closed!”

Mom was on our side, but we didn’t know how long she would continue to stand up for Elijah. Mom would say, “Kids you know I love Elijah, but I love Dad even more. So if I have to choose between the two, you know who I would pick.”

Then Mom would wink at us and say to Dad, “Bur if you would ask me today, I just might pick Elijah.”

And we would all laugh, except for Dad.

Why didn’t Dad like Elijah? Maybe because he was always hungry. It was true. Elijah never met a piece of food he didn’t like.

Maybe because Dad wanted a quiet home and Elijah barked a lot of the time. You see, Elijah could hear the slightest sound or smell a new smell that none of us could sense. And since Elijah couldn’t exactly talk about his new discovery, he would bark, and bark, and bark and bark....

Sometimes, Elijah, who usually slept in my room, would wake us up in the middle of the night, because he smelled the scent of another animal or because he heard a noise outside – a door banging, a window knocking. He would then go back to sleep and so would we – if we could.

One night, though, Elijah started barking.....but did not stop.

“Elijah, enough already”, I pleaded with him. The clock said 4:30 am. And I had to do a class presentation that day, I groaned to myself.

But Elijah kept barking.

I pulled the covers over my head to drown out the noise.

Elijah came over to my bed and pulled the covers off of my face.

I was annoyed. "Elijah, I don't want to play with you now," I mumbled, half asleep.

I tried to pull the covers back over my face, but Elijah held fast.

Then something amazing happened.

Elijah pulled the whole blanket off my body, off my bed and headed towards my bedroom door with the blanket in his mouth. He nudged it open with his nose, and ran down the stairs into the living room.

I was now completely awake, and completely out of patience.

"Elijah, you're gonna get it," I roared.

I stumbled down the stairs, and then I realized what Elijah was barking about.

A small fire had started in the corner of the living room, near the fireplace!

I froze for a moment. The fire was gathering strength and the smoke was beginning to make it difficult to see!

Elijah began to bark even louder, and I snapped out of my shock. I quickly ran to my parent's room and pounded on the door. They were up in moments, and by the time they reached the door, the smoke was already rising into the second floor of the house.

"Quick, you take David out of the house, I'll wake up Rebecca," Dad shouted to Mom.

But Rebecca was already up, wakened by the noise. Mom raced down the stairs with the two of us and led us to the front lawn outside our house.

Elijah continued to bark, as Dad ran to the nearest phone to call the fire department. Dad then raced into the kitchen, picked up the fire extinguisher, and tried to put out the flames. But Dad could not stand the heat from the flames, so he finally gave up, and ran out of the house too.

But he was not the last to leave the house. Only after Dad left, did Elijah decide he could leave to.

Within minutes, the fire department arrived and put out the fire.

"You were very lucky to have a dog like that," the fire chief said. "We sure could use him around the station. If you ever are looking for a new home for him, we'd be happy to take him."

Both of us looked at Dad. Our hearts began to pound.

Dad looked at the fire chief, "Thanks for the offer, but Elijah – that's our dog's name – he's here to stay. We'd never part with him, not for all the money in the world! We wouldn't even think of it!" Then Dad actually petted Elijah on the head.

"Well, I guess I don't have to choose between the two of you anymore," Mom joked.

My sister and I smiled at each other. Elijah was finally ours for good! We looked at Elijah. He barked a few times and wagged his tail, as if he understood the importance of the moment.

Since that time, we still open the door for Elijah the Prophet every Passover. And when we do, we remember the first time we met our cold, wet and freezing four legged friend on that lucky Passover night so many years ago.

You know it's funny. Whenever I tell people that our dog's name is Elijah, they laugh. Some of them even say, "Oh his name is Elijah... I suppose he is named after Elijah the Prophet and has all these special powers..."

And I say: "You never know."

Then I smile at Elijah who is also smiling because we both know the truth.

And I'd bet that right now you are smiling too.

Because now you also know why our dog is so special and why he is called Elijah.

An original folk-tale by Eli Rubenstein

The Miraculous Story of the Sarajevo Haggadah - And the People who Saved it & Each Other

In the world of Jewish books, no book has more versions created of it, than the Passover Haggadah, which retells the Passover story and is read each year at the Passover Seder. (Hagaddah, by the way, means "telling".)

In Jewish circles, there are even more versions of the Haggadah than there are of the Bible. The Haggadahs often produced with new, novel interpretations as well as artistic representations of the Passover events in the margins of the Haggadah. Perhaps the most famous of these Haggadahs, is the Sarajevo Haggadah, an illuminated manuscript that was created in the Middle Ages.

The Sarajevo Haggadah is the oldest Sephardic Haggadah in the world, originating in Barcelona around 1350. The Sarajevo Haggadah, probably left Spain in 1492, then was taken to Venice, before it was obtained by the Bosnian museum in 1894. The Haggadah is currently owned by the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, where it is on display.

The Sarajevo Haggadah is inscribed by hand on parchment (bleached calfskin) and decorated in copper and gold. It begins with 34 pages of illustrations of central moments from the Bible, from the creation story through the death of Moses. Its pages are colored with wine stains, from actual usage at Passover Seders over the centuries.

The Sarajevo Haggadah is among the most exquisite illuminated Jewish manuscripts - and one of the most valuable books - in the world. Recently, it was appraised at US\$700 million (At that price, I don't think I am able to afford even one letter in the Haggadah!)

In a recent edition of the New Yorker ("The Book of Exodus," December 3) Geraldine Brooks tells a fascinating story which I have summarized below:

In WWII, when Yugoslavia was divided, Sarajevo suffered greatly. In 1941, Ante Pavelic, Hitler's ally, proceeded to massacre Jews, Gypsies, and Serbs, some of whom sought assistance from their Muslim or Croat neighbors. The Bosnian National Museum's chief librarian at the time was Dervis Korkut, the scion of a prosperous family of Muslim intellectuals and an avowed anti-Fascist, who had studied theology in Istanbul and the Sorbonne. Korkut rescued the Sarajevo Haggadah (which was housed at the museum) from the hands of the Nazis.



In 1942, when Nazi commander Johann Fortner arrived at the museum, seizing the Sarajevo Haggadah was one of his prime objectives.

Geraldine Brooks in her article in the New Yorker, picks up the story from here:

And there was Dervis Korkut with the book, hidden under his coat. When Fortner confronted Korkut over the book, Korkut simply said another Nazi officer had already been by to take possession of it. "What officer?" Fortner barked. "Name the man!" "Sir," Korkut replied, "I did not think it was my place to require a name." The book was saved.

(According to some versions of the story, Korkut eventually hid the Haggadah under the floorboards of a Sarajevo mosque.)

Even more importantly, Dervis rescued a young Jewish girl named Mira Papo, in April of 1942. Mira had been a member of the Young Guardians, a socialist Zionist youth movement, and a member of Tito's Resistance until he began throwing out its Jewish members. Papo was taken in by Korkut who brought her to his home and passed her off as a Muslim servant. He then sent her to an aunt married to a Catholic on the Dalmatian coast, where she stayed until the war's close.

After the war, Korkut, who refused to bend to either the Fascists or the Communists, was arrested by Tito and put on trial for supposed collaboration with the Fascists. Mira, fearing for her life (which was a plausible concern) did not come forward and testify in his defense. Many years later, after Mira had moved to Israel, she tried to make amends for her silence, when she told her story to Yad Vashem (Israel's National Holocaust Museum) and ensured that Korkut was listed as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations". (Mira was to later learn from Korkut's widow that her testimony would have made no difference as Tito was bent on punishing Korkut, who was sent to prison but eventually released.)

Several decades later it was now Mira's chance to fully repay her debt. By now Dervis Korkut had passed away, but his granddaughter Lamija, was living in Kosovo when the ethnic cleansing began in 1998.

Lamija and her husband were herded into a refugee camp in Serbia with thousands of other refugees. With the help of the head of the local Jewish community, who was shown a copy of Mira's testimony at Yad Vashem, the couple was freed from the refugee camp and eventually flown to Israel, soon to be followed by their children (who had successfully fled the region prior to these events.)

The story concludes like this:

"They arrived in the terminal at Ben-Gurion Airport, blinking in the strong Mediterranean sunlight and the flash of reporters' cameras. The story of how Dervis, a Muslim, had saved Mira and Mira, a Jew, had saved Dervis' child proved irresistible to the Israeli media, and to its politicians. [...] Then, in the midst of all the chaos, someone addressed her in Serbo-Croatian. 'It was a good feeling to have someone speaking your language,' she said. But she had no idea who it could be, greeting her so warmly. Pushing through the crowd was a slender, wiry man she had never seen before, with a shock of dark hair and a mustache. Opening his arms, he introduced himself, and Lamija fell into the embrace of Davor Bakovic, the son of Mira Papo."

I wanted to start off the Seder with this story, not just because it is about a Passover Haggadah, but also because it's a story about people treasuring each other's cultures and saving each other's lives. It's a story about giving and receiving, about saving and being saved – and it's a story of brotherhood and sisterhood.

And so let us begin this Seder tonight, as we are in the presence of so many people of different cultures and backgrounds, by thinking of the remarkable story of the Sarajevo Haggadah, and of the remarkable people who saved the Haggadah and ultimately saved each other.

A Blessing in Disguise

Based on a Jewish Folk Tale, Retold by Eli Rubenstein

The couple was celebrating their third Passover together. Though not selfish people, they were not overly generous with their time or their possessions. They were proud of their spotless house and all the furnishings they had worked hard to acquire.

The Passover Seder had begun, with just the two of them, when they came to the passage in the Haggadah that states "Let all who are hungry come in and eat..." A sudden banging at their door startled them. An old man, his beard streaked with white and gray, his clothes more torn than whole, was standing in their threshold.

"I am looking for a place for the Passover Seder," he stated bluntly. Peering over their shoulders, he saw the table set, with the Seder plate at the end and the Cup of Elijah in the middle. "It looks like I've found the right place." The couple looked at each other. The old man edged his way through the door, and the couple moved aside. After all, he had arrived exactly during the recitation of the passage inviting all strangers into their home, they thought.

Moments later they regretted their decision. The surprise visitor was the worst guest they had ever entertained.

Most of the soup he was served ended up on his clothing rather than in his mouth. He recited the Haggadah in an incomprehensible manner, spilled the wine all over their expensive white table cloth, and turned the pages of the Haggadah with such force, that he ripped more than a few of them right out of the book.

The couple were only too overjoyed when the old man left. Yet even this moment disturbed the couple. "I will leave you with a blessing. May every future Passover you share be as joyous as this one," said the old man on his way out. The couple looked at each other in horror. This was not a blessing, but a curse, they thought.

A few weeks after Passover passed, the couple received a second shock. The wife was pregnant and had been so for a few months. The couple, of course, were planning on having children, but not just yet. They had certain financial goals they hoped to reach before starting a family. But when their baby daughter was born, the couple forgot all about their earlier misgivings. The joy of bringing a new life into the world, the boundless love they felt towards their infant, and the endless delight they took in even the smallest gesture of their child, made all other considerations vanish.

The next Passover was far different. This time the couple had friends over for the Seder, toys lay everywhere, and the furniture was looking a bit ragged. And at the Seder table, when their child babbled on incoherently, or spilled the wine in the table, or ripped the pages of the Haggadah with uncontrolled zeal...to the surprise of their friends the couple just laughed it off as their little "genius" at work.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Before they could even rise, the old man stood in front of them. And, precisely at the same moment, they realized that his parting words were truly... "a blessing in disguise".

The Meaning of Freedom

Source: Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, Yaffa Eliach

Bergen Belsen, the foreign Nationals section of the camp, 1942. A group of Jews had approached Rav Yisroel Spira, the Bluzhover Rebbe, with an incredible request. Passover was only two weeks away, and many of them, sensing this might be their last Passover, were desperate to find a way to celebrate the festival. The thought of eating chametz (unleavened bread) was anathema to them, so they came up with an idea. They would appeal to the logical German mind of their oppressors and ask to receive their rations as flour and water instead of bread, and they would ask as well to build, on their own time at night, a crude oven with which to bake their rations into matzah. After all, they reasoned, if the prisoners would start baking their own bread, this would be more efficient and economical, which would appeal to the mindset of their masters.

They asked the Rebbe if he would be willing to present their petition, signed by over eighty inmates, to the SS commandant of the camp, in the hopes that his merit and the merit of his illustrious ancestors would somehow protect them all and ensure a successful outcome. The Rebbe took some time to consider their request. Handing the Nazis a list of Jewish names was a very dangerous thing to do, especially in a concentration camp. Yet here was a group of Jews, enslaved, starving, almost beyond hope, and yet still willing to risk everything for the sake of a mitzvah. How could he be the obstacle to the fulfillment of such a holy deed?

So the Rebbe asked for an audience with the camp Commandant, and through some miracle (and after a number of severe beatings,) their request was granted. Two weeks later, on the eve of Pesach (Passover) the Jews of Bergen Belsen actually baked matzah in preparation for the festival.

The Bluzhover Rebbe announced he would conduct a secret Seder in his barracks for those interested. Attending, never mind conducting, a Seder in Bergen Belsen was a crime punishable by death. Nonetheless, nearly three hundred Jews crowded into the Rebbe's barracks that Pesach night. When they reached the point in the Seder that spoke of their bondage in Egypt, there was a palpable air of pain and anguish that spread through the barracks.

"Avadim Hayinu Le'Paroah be'Mitzrayim... Atah Be'nei Chorin..." 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and now we are free men...'

The Rebbe could hear the sobs and feel the pain in every Jew's heart, and knew he had to say something. How could a Jew recite these words in Bergen Belsen in 1942?

He looked around the barracks, in the dim moonlight, seeing the gaunt, hollow faces, and hopeless eyes, and he began:

"Why is this Seder different from all other Seders? We have no four cups of wine to bless, no tables laden with good food and fine china, no children to ask the four questions, and no vegetables to dip in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt so long ago. Our Matzah, burned, small, and barely recognizable as the same matzah we had before the war, reminds us more of where we are than of where we once were. Only Maror, the bitter herbs, are in abundance this year.

"But if even here, in the depths of our darkness and despair, we can nonetheless recall the exodus and celebrate Pesach, then we are truly free. Freedom, you see, isn't about where you are, it is about who you are."

Milk & Meat

A woman once approached the Rabbi of the city of Brisk, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, with a strange question. She wanted to know if one could use milk instead of wine for the four cups of the Seder. She explained that she could not afford wine. He answered her by giving her a large amount of money. Asked the Rabbi's wife, "I understand you gave her money because she can't afford the wine, but why so much?"

Answered the Rabbi, "If she wants to drink milk at the Seder, it is obvious she has no meat for Pesach (as there is a prohibition to eat meat and milk at the same meal). So I gave her enough to buy wine and meat for the entire Holiday."

Passover on New Year's Eve

In December 1942, another Passover story unfolded in the forced labour camp called Brand,. It was actually Dec. 31st, New Year's Eve, and the sadistic Nazi Second in Command, woke the Jews up at the stroke of midnight commanding them to sing and dance.....

And the song they sang, was "Ve' Sheamda", which states in every generation our enemies rise up to vanquish us, but the Holy One will ultimately prevail.

It was New Year's for the sadistic Nazi guard, but for Jews of that camp they were observing the holiday of Passover and recalling its message of freedom.

Source: Story told by Roman Ziegler, Holocaust survivor and participant in the 1996 March of the Living. The story appears in Voices from the Heart: A Community Celebrates 50 Years of Israel, by Bonnie Goldstein and Jaclyn Shulman.